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# The Development of Boxing: The Ancient World (The Eastern Alps, Pre-Roman Italia, and Sardinia)

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## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>193</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Eastern Alps</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Etruria</b>	<b>214</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Lucania (Pæstum)</b>	<b>234</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Sardinia</b>	<b>240</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>244</b>

### Abstract

Long before Roman rule, boxing in Italy, the Eastern Alps, and Sardinia had a particularly sanguinary character. The visual culture of Etruscan, Celtic, and Hallstatt artifacts depict unique local developments in the sweet science. For instance, the Etruscan funeral cult embraced boxing to the death to the accompaniment of music, a strong association unseen since the days of the Hittites. Ultimately, this field of boxing points to the Hellenistic and Roman unification of pre-Roman Italic *pygmaichia* into uniquely violent manifestations as Greek influence in Italy grew.

## I Introduction

Italy proved fertile ground for the dissemination and hybridization of boxing as practiced by the Greeks. Diverse forms of orthograde combat sport almost certainly predated Hellenic colonization of the Appenine Peninsula, with possible influences from the Phoenicians and Minoans. Unfortunately, boxing in the Roman world has generally been dismissed as a degradation of Greek athleticism. We approach the problem differently, recalling the brutal aspects of boxing that existed long before the ascent of Rome, including in Italy. In the absence of extensive written records about boxing in this region of the world, the visual culture shows forth an abundance of boxing genius.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>We recollect to your mind the genesis of *genius* as the Greek spirit of place.

## 2 Eastern Alps

Toreutic<sup>2</sup> representations of stylistically similar boxers are found on more than a dozen objects, primarily bronze situlae,<sup>3</sup> distributed in a region from Vienna to Bologna and from the Austrian Tyrol to Lower Carniola in southeastern Slovenia (Figure 1). There is no suitable modern geographic descriptor for this area: Bologna is not Alpine and Vienna is not Adriatic. Nor do ethnic terms provide a clear delimiter: The relevant situlae were discovered at Iron age sites associated with the Etruscans (Bologna), Veneti (Este, Kobarid), Celts (Fließ, Sanzeno, Mechel), partakers of the Hallstatt culture<sup>4</sup> (Kuffarn, Kleinklein), and Illyrians (Vače, Magdalenska Gora, Dolenjske Toplice). Even ancient regional names provide no more clarity: The Romans called the sites of situla deposition Noricum, Rhætia, Pannonia, Illyricum, Venetia, and Cisalpine Gaul. A circle drawn around these sites has its center approximately at the three-way border of modern Italy, Slovenia, and Austria in the Julian Alps. Recognizing that those toreutic boxers were widely disseminated, if not rendered, in a large and ethnically diverse region, we call this section ‘Eastern Alps’ and will occasionally characterize the situla boxers as ‘Alpine’.<sup>5</sup>

Though it is sometimes claimed that situla art was an Etruscan export to this region,<sup>6</sup> the quantity and distribution of evidence may suggest the opposite: the Etruscans were introduced to East Alpine art and the autochthonous cultural conventions that it depicted. Based on the deposition of toreutic artifacts, the situlae most likely originated in the Eastern Alps. When some of the decorated situlae became burial goods of the Etruscan elite (e.g., the Certosa and Benvenuti Situlae), these had presumably been preserved in Etruria as exotic treasures from the northeast.

Boxers are among the most common figural motifs found in situla art (Frelih 1989, p. 104). One particularly well-known example comes from the Vače Situla (National Museum of Slovenia, No. P-581, Figure 11). According to Frelih, the poses of the situla boxers, along with the presence of a prize tripod in at least one exemplar (the Matrei Situla, Tyrolean State Museum, No. 2274, Figure 5), “offer concrete proof that the early toreutic workshops ... were inspired by Greek templates” (1989, p. 105, translation ours). However, there is reason to be skeptical of a direct connection between the form of boxing represented in situla art and Greek *pygmaichia*. The most notable difference is that the boxers on the situlae hold objects

<sup>2</sup>Toreutic art uses embossing and chasing in metal to form fine details in relief.

<sup>3</sup>A situla is essentially an elaborate bucket or pail, usually equipped with a handle on top and sometimes a lid.

<sup>4</sup>Participants in the Hallstatt culture were probably Celtic-speaking; they spread across western and central Europe during the Iron Age.

<sup>5</sup>If we remove the outlying Kuffarn situla, the geographic center of the situlae’s distribution is perhaps at Trieste (where no situlae have been found). We are unsatisfied with the assertion (Poliakoff 1987a, pp. 75–76) that the toreutic boxers are “Illyrian,” since perhaps only four relevant artifacts (three situlae and one belt buckle) were deposited in the region of ancient Illyria, though they do, admittedly, form a tight cluster there. Elsewhere, the objects are described as “Veneto–Illyrian” (Merhart 1932), but this excludes Celtic and Etruscan influence. We believe that reluctance by some scholars to characterize the toreutic situla art as “Alpine” stems from their hesitance to associate these objects with Iron Age Celtic culture(s)—well outside the influence of Etruria, not to mention Greece. Some confidently assert that the artifacts are Hallstattian, referring to the (probably) Eastern Celtic culture of the Iron Age, linked to the town of Hallstatt in Upper Austria (Egg 1980, Lazar 2011). Frelih (1989, p. 104) argues that the depictions of boxers were produced by the Este (sometimes called Paleo-Venetian) culture, under influence from Greek colonizers of the Appenine peninsula.

<sup>6</sup>“[I]t should be possible to find in Etruria alone, motifs which could explain the origin of situla art in its particular form” (Mansuelli 1965, p. xxix).

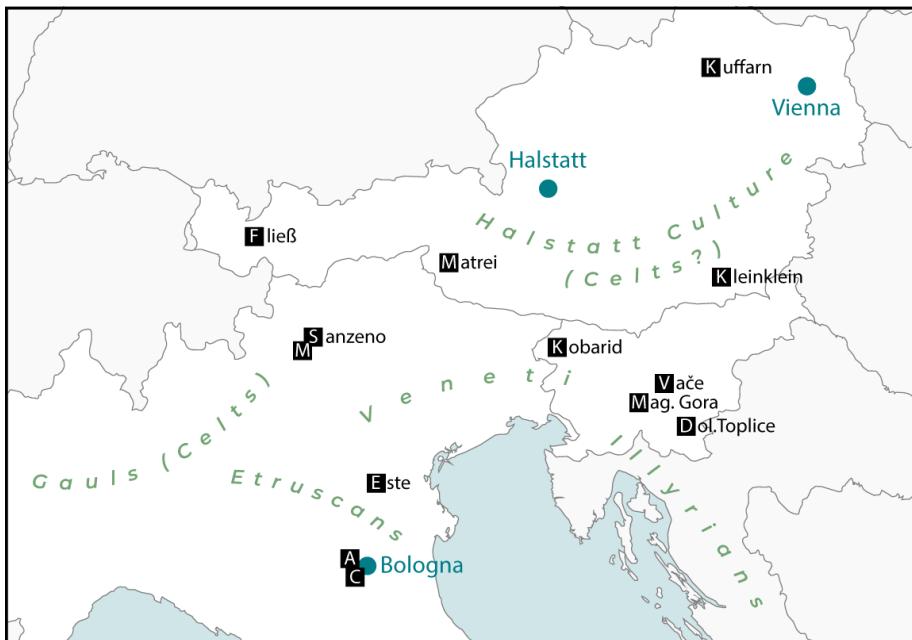


Figure 1: Map showing Iron Age sites where visual representations of boxers (primarily toretic decoration on situlae) have been found in Italy, Austria, and Slovenia. Occupation by various Iron Age cultures is indicated along with modern political boundaries. M = Mechel; A = Necropoli Arnoaldi; C = Necropoli della Certosa. Fließ and Landeck appear only as "Fließ". The map does not include Rome, though two (most likely imported and/or copied) artifacts depicting Alpine boxers were found there.

shaped like dumbbells, which they appear to wield against one another as fist-load weapons<sup>7</sup> capable of inflicting serious injury in a single blow.

The distal ends of these dumbbell-shaped objects are rounded, if not spherical. It seems likely that a bar extends between the ends and that the fingers are wrapped around it with the thumb projecting (Figure 11, *inter alia*).<sup>8</sup> In other depictions, it appears that a strap runs across the knuckles (e.g., in the Kuffarn Situla, Natural History Museum Vienna, No. 17036, Figure 8). Because none of these dumbbell-shaped objects have been recovered “in archaeological contexts,” it has been assumed by many that they “must have been made of organic material such as wood or leather” and thus, by now they have decomposed completely (Rebay-Salisbury 2012, p. 190). English-speaking scholars seem to have settled on the term ‘dumbbell’ to denominate the object. The (plural) *hanteln* is used in German; in Slovenian, *ročke*; in Italian, *manubri*.<sup>9</sup> One author calls them *venetisch Cæstus* ‘Venetian cæstus’ (Mehrt 1932, p. 61, fn. 1). The aim of the fight may have been to knock the dumbbell out of an opponent’s hand, as suggested by the Arnoaldi Situla (Figure 10), in which the fighter on the right appears to have dropped one of his *hanteln* already (Rebay-Salisbury 2012, p. 191). Egg (1980, p. 55) refers to the dumbbell as *Faustschutz* ‘fist guard’, under the hypothesis that the objects were not offensive weapons but merely protection for the hands.

It seems unlikely that these objects were suitable for protection, however, since they cover almost none of the hand. We concur with others who regard the dumbbells as relatively heavy weapons that the boxers used to strike each other in earnest (Thuillier 1985, Lazar 2011). In our opinion, the *hanteln* were sacrificial implements that added heft to the fists; they would have been particularly effective at smashing the skull of one’s opponent and spattering his brains. In the words of one scholar, the weapons were “terrifying and murderous” *terrifiantes et meurtrières* (Thuillier 1985, p. 265). Others will doubtless disagree with our interpretation, but we find little evidence to support the counterclaim that the dumbbells were illæsive.<sup>10</sup> Lucke and Frey (1962, p. 27), for example, refuse to see in the dumbbells a deadly weapon. For an unacknowledged reason, they dismiss this possibility as a “thoroughly barbaric affair” (*eine durchaus barbarische Angelegenheit*). They argue that the dumbbells are “nothing more than protection for the hands and at the same time protection from excessive injuries, just like our modern boxing gloves.”<sup>11</sup> No rationale is given for this conclusion, however, other than the alternative seems too “barbaric” a competition.<sup>12</sup> They suggest that the objects must be made of leather or cloth rather than bronze because of the strap that can be seen across the back of the hand in some depictions (e.g., the Matrei Situla, Figure 5). This, we are assured, could not be made of bronze (*ibid.*).<sup>13</sup> They offer the interesting hypothesis

<sup>7</sup>An example of another such weapon, highly similar in form to the dumbbell of the Iron Age Alps, is the Japanese *yawara*.

<sup>8</sup>We have considered and do not decisively reject a hypothesis that the dumbbell is a doubly-knotted rope, which would stabilize the fist and be slightly more dangerous than a gloved fist. We prefer another interpretation of the visual evidence due to corroborative cultural predilections discussed below.

<sup>9</sup>The term *manopla*, which has the sense of ‘knuckle-duster’, is used sometimes used in reference to Mayan boxing (Taube and Zender 2009, Taube 2018).

<sup>10</sup>Gardiner (1930, p. 121) writes, “[I]t is hard to conceive any people inventing a weapon so clumsy and so inappropriate for boxing.” This claim is weakened if one considers that the East Alpine boxers fought for their lives.

<sup>11</sup>“Die hantelförmigen Gegenstände sind nichts anderes als ein Schutz für die Hände und zugleich Schutz vor zu harten Verletzungen genau wie unsere heutigen Boxhandschuhe” (Lucke and Frey 1962, p. 27)

<sup>12</sup>We note that it is relatively easy to convince scholars that similar objects wielded in boxing matches were indeed meant to maim and kill—as long as the evidence comes from the New World (Taube and Zender 2009).

<sup>13</sup>... man sich diese kaum in Bronze vorstellen kann.

that the dumbbells were used to force the fighters to make a fist: the open hand seen in Greek depictions would be impossible if the phalanges were curled around the dumbbell throughout the fight.<sup>14</sup> According to the authors, this would have resulted in “a more subtle, agile arm technique” (*ibid.*).<sup>15</sup> While we are not convinced that the dumbbells would add much in terms of subtlety or agility, we agree that holding the dumbbells likely prevented the fighters from relaxing their clenched fists. Along with the belt, which by their interpretation served as a boundary for low punches,<sup>16</sup> and the wrist straps, which provided some support and protection to the boxer’s wrists, Lucke and Frey (1962) claim the ‘hand protectors’ must have ensured that Alpine boxing never devolved into “barbaric brawls” (*barbarische Schlagerei*), though admittedly less skillful than a modern boxing match.

While the dumbbells themselves are not described in any literary account, the dashing of skulls is a common leitmotif in Latin epic boxing matches, including the ones recounted in the *Aeneid*, the Valerian *Argonautica*, and Book 6 of the *Thebaid* (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023). We believe that dumbbell boxing spread south from the Eastern Alps by way of the Etruscans, who were evidently interested in boxing as a form of ritual killing (Section 3). While the dumbbells were probably known to the Romans only as an archaic device (e.g., in the Corsini Chair, found at Rome), their capacity for mayhem in the boxing ‘ring’ of the Alps was remembered and eventually transduced into the cruel *cæstus* described hundreds of years later by the poets Vergil, Valerius, and Statius.

We have found reference to eighteen situlæ or sheet bronze fragments, five relief figurines, and one clay relief fragment depicting boxers of the East Alpine variety.<sup>17</sup> We will discuss each of these items briefly before comparing features relevant to the scenes of pugilism. The eighteen toreutic pieces, their provenance, and their approximate dates of production (when available) are listed here:

- Kleinklein Schmiedkogel Vessel (Austria): 700–600 BC
- Kleinklein Kröllkogel Vessel (Austria):
- Certosa Situla (Bologna): 600–550 BC
- Matrei Situla (Austria) 600–500 BC
- Magdalenska Gora Belt plate (Slovenia): 600–400 BC
- Benvenuti/Este Situla (Este): ca. 600 BC
- Kuffarn Situla (Austria): 550 BC
- Providence Situla (Bologna): 530–525 BC
- Arnoaldi Situla (Bologna): 500–400 BC
- Vače Situla (Slovenia): 500–400 BC

<sup>14</sup> Modern boxing gloves, made of molded open cellular polyurethane foam covered by a bit of leather, achieve a similar effect, by forcing the fingers to remain curled slightly at all times, though not necessarily balled into a tight fist.

<sup>15</sup>... eine bewegtere, fintenreichere Armtechnik.

<sup>16</sup> Thuillier (1985, pp. 380–381) muses on the possibility that a cord—tied to the belt on one end and the foreskin on the other—was used to infibulate the fighters.

<sup>17</sup> Poliakoff (1987a, p. 75) states that “Horseshoe shaped gloves show up at least eighteen times in Illyrian and Italic art” between 700 and 300 BC. He evidently refers here to the dumbbells, since he exemplifies his claim with detail from a fourth-century Roman/Etruscan sarcophagus lid (Figure 36) and the fifth-century Matrei Situla (Figure 5), both of which clearly show fighters using the *hanteln*. In his estimate, Poliakoff almost certainly includes the sarcophagus lid as well as the well-known Corsini Throne (Figure 35), which we exclude from our count and present as Etruscan artifacts in Section 3.

- Kobarid Situla (Slovenia): 500–400 BC
- Magdalenska Gora Situla (Slovenia): ca. 500 BC
- Magdalenska Gora lid (Slovenia): 500–400 BC
- Dolenjske Toplice (Slovenia)
- Sheet bronze fragments (Santuário Orientale, Este)
- Sheet bronze fragments (Fließ, Austria)
- Mechel Situla (Italy)
- Sanzeno Situla (Italy)

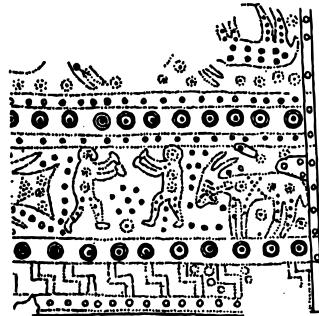


Figure 2: Detail from a seventh-century vessel found in the Schmiedkogel at Kleinklein and described by Schmid (1933) (museum unspecified, No. 1998). The decoration includes images of boxers wielding the *hanteln*.

*Hanteln* are implied even in the “primitive” boxers visible on two early, point-bossed cistæ (Ger. *zister*) found at Kleinklein in lower Austria (Frey 1969, p. 68). In the example found at Schmiedkogel (Ziste VIII), the fists are widened unnaturally at the knuckles, suggestive of the dumbbells (Figure 2). Both objects are wielded at the opponent simultaneously, as in the Benvenuti Situla (Figure 7). This is the earliest known image of dumbbell boxing, dated to the seventh century BC. The object is described in greater detail by Frey (1999). On another exemplar of a point-bossed vessel discovered in the nearby Kröllkogel, the boxers do not appear to use the *hanteln* (Figure 3).

The toreutic art on the Certosa Situla (Museo Civico, Bologna, no inventory number; Figure 4) arguably represents a funeral ceremony with individual scenes from everyday life. In the panel of interest, two musicians are seated on an elaborate couch with armrests in the shape of vorant beasts: one consumes a hare and the other, a person. Atop each armrest a boxer swings one fist forward at his adversary on the opposing side. The elaborate couch has at least one literary/archaeological model, suggesting that the diminutive boxers are intended to represent statuary that adorn the furniture (Bonfante 2011). Frelih (1989, p. 110), who seems most puzzled by the fact that boxers are separated from one another,<sup>18</sup> proposes that they are included on the situla as mere ornament and not as integral parts of the scene. The composition, Frelih reasons, did not provide enough space to include the stan-

<sup>18</sup>Frelih (1989, p. 110) notes the boxers’ vigorous posture (*razgibani telesni drž*).

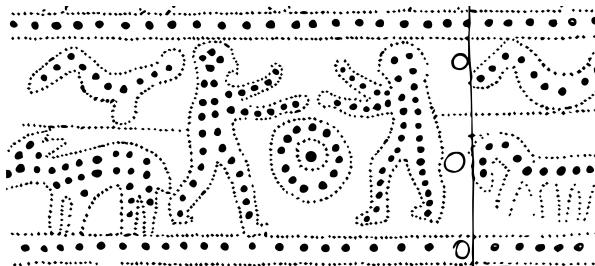


Figure 3: Detail from a seventh-century (?) vessel found in the Kröllkogel at Kleinklein and described in Schmid (1933) (museum unspecified, No. 10711). The boxers do not appear to hold anything in their hands.

dard toreutic boxing scene and so the artist simply crammed them in where he could—an elaborate example of *horror vacui*.

The boxers on the Certosa Situla have been misjudged as boys tossing items into the bucket that floats above the center of the panel (Lucke and Frey 1962, p. 28). While the tableau is certainly an odd one, most scholars have no trouble believing that the figures represent boxers, given the prevalence of similar figures in East Alpine situla art. The Certosa fighters wear the Alpine boxing belt observed in other toreutic representations. Moreover, the position of their legs and arms is consistent with the posture necessary to throw a punch, though they pitch forward at the waist in a manner distinct from that of the boxers on other situlae. It is difficult to discern whether the Certosa boxers use the *hanteln*, however.

The boxers on the Matrei Situla (Tyrolean State Museum, No. 2274; Figure 5) adhere more closely to the common template for a scene of Alpine pugilism. They are nude but for a belt and one armband. They clutch the dumbbells, one of which appears to have a strap crossing the knuckles. The fighter on the left has a prominently extended thumb. In the ‘prize position’ known from much older Near Eastern models (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b) stand a horned helmet with a plume and a spear.<sup>19</sup> A circular ornament occupies the space between the waist of the fighter on the right and the helmet prize. The boxers’ genitals are in full view—a feature that has received some comment (see below).

A unique belt plate depicting toreutic boxers (Natural History Museum Vienna, No. 22962; Figure 6) was discovered at Magdalenska Gora, Slovenia, in 1893 (Frelih 1989, p. 99). In the upper left-hand corner of the plate an aquatic bird (*Cro. barske ptice*, lit., ‘pond bird’) holds a writhing serpent in its mouth. According to Stipčević (1981, pp. 23–29), the bird was a well-known symbol of the sun god throughout Illyria. He supposes that the confrontation between the bird and the serpent is a recapitulation of the contest between celestial and infernal forces, as in the fight between Apollo and the Python in Greek myth. Frelih (1989, p. 99) claims that the motif is ‘exceptional’ (*izjemen*) and argues that the fight between the ‘eagle’ and snake symbolizes the eternal struggle between light and darkness, good and evil (p. 100). The agonism of bird and snake is complemented by that of the two naked boxers to the right. They clearly hold *rocke* and swing dynamically at one another, their back legs bent in a stance

<sup>19</sup>Thuillier (1985, p. 206) has argued that the spear may serve as a demarcation of the boxing ring, citing similar lances found on the Corsini Throne (see Section 3).



Figure 4: Detail of the Certosa Situla with boxers standing on the theriomorphic armrests of an elaborate couch. Museo Civico, Bologna (no inventory number), 600–550 BC.

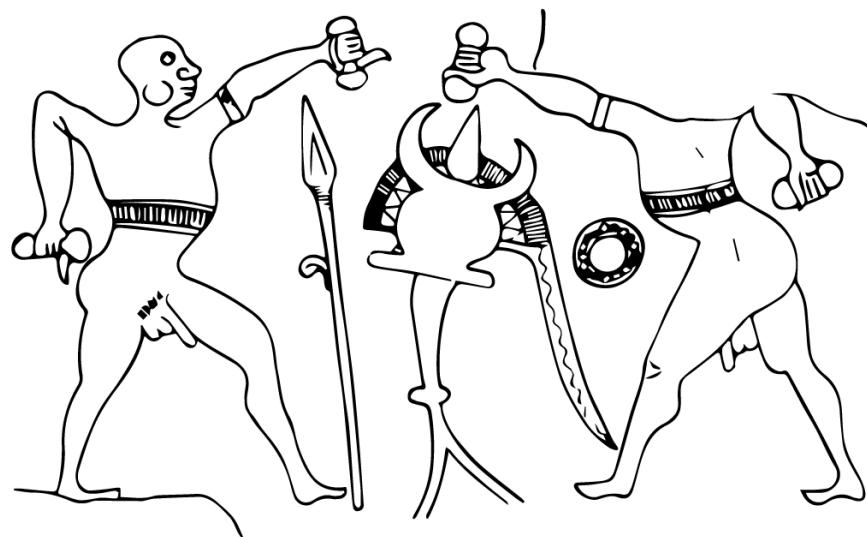


Figure 5: Detail from the sixth-century Matrei Situla, Tyrolean State Museum (No. 2274).

associated with body blows. Nevertheless, they seem to direct the dumbbells at each other's heads.



Figure 6: The Magdalenska Gora *Gürtelblech* ‘belt plate’, depicting dumbbell-wielding boxers (Natural History Museum Vienna, No. 22962). The object is dated 700–600 BC.



Figure 7: Detail from the Benvenuti Situla, Museo Nazionale Atestino, No. 6182, ca. 600 BC.

The scenes limned on the Benvenuti Situla (Museo Nazionale Atestino, No. 6182; Figure 7) are heavily orientalizing, with fantastical creatures like griffins and sphinges—one striding directly towards the boxers from the right (Frelih 1989, p. 109). Because the boxing match appears to lack a trophy, Frelih argues that is derived from “some proposal [*predlog*] not directly influenced by the Greek variant” (*ibid.*, translation ours). According to him, boxing in the Eastern Alps must have had several origins, going so far as to suggest that it first reached the Appenine Peninsula by way of Phoenician traders.

The Kuffarn Situla, found in Austria, contains a depiction of two naked boxers who also wield *hanteln* (Natural History Museum Vienna, No. 17036, Figure 8). Figures, perhaps referees, stand on the right and left, bearing forked rods. A plumed helmet appears between the adversaries, on a stand. The form of the boxers is particularly supple, emphasizing their swollen calf muscles. The boxers are bald.

While some critics characterize the Providence Situla (Rhode Island School of Design #32.245; Figure 9) as an Etruscan artifact, its boxing scene is highly similar to those found on

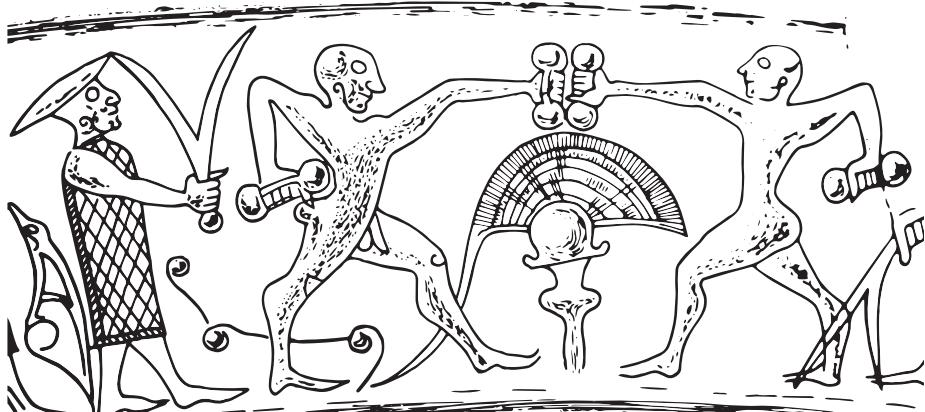


Figure 8: Detail from the Kuffarn Situla, Natural History Museum Vienna (No. 17036).

other East Alpine situlæ. The object is dated between 530 and 525 BC. It was found in Bologna and, according to its curators, it is “said to be from Certosa Necropolis,” an Etruscan site. The situla bears an inscription about its rim in the Rhætic language, recently argued to be a close relative of Etruscan (Schürr 2003).<sup>20</sup> Another proposal is that the inscription is in fact Etruscan. Translated from that language, the inscription *irxie siati kaianin mlvainice* reads, “This was given to Irchi by Kaian” (Olzscha 1962, pp. 85–86). The boxers on the Providence Situla wield the familiar *hanteln* and wear a belt and armband but are otherwise naked. They stand above neatly-folded robes, topped by their hats. Onlookers in cloaks and hats appear to bear no special mark of their office. In the ‘prize position’ we find a ceremonial vessel on an elaborate stand with avian heads. A curious bird perches on the bowl to refresh itself and take in the action.

According to Huth (2003), the Arnoaldi Situla (Archæological Museum of Bologna, no inventory number; Figure 10) may be dated as late as 400 BC. The boxers are rendered rather simply and with less attention to proportion and physiognomy than we observe in other exemplars. The pugilists lack armbands but both wear a belt. As mentioned previously, the boxer on the right, holds a dumbbell in his right hand only. The other one has perhaps dropped. Given the somewhat crude modeling of the anatomy, it possible that the dumbbell/fist was also rendered poorly (we note the small size of the *hantel* in the corresponding, back hand of the boxer on the left). The artist has taken some pains to limn a hairline, cap or perhaps even a helmet on both fighters. They are not, in any event, capitally unencumbered as in other tauric representations. The familiar plumed helmet stands between them.

The Vače Situla, found in modern-day Slovenia and today a celebrated artifact of the region, shows two boxers in the classic two-dimensional pose known from Sumerian times (National Museum of Slovenia, No. P-581; Figure 11). Both naked but for a belt or rope stretching across mid-abdomen and an armband of similar material on one (uplifted) arm. Their genitals are unencumbered and visible, even on the right-hand boxer, where the thigh of his projecting left leg partially obscures them. The fighters grasp the *rocke* tightly with

<sup>20</sup>Others have argued that Rhaetic is Indo-European and that its speakers were heavily influenced by Celtic and Illyrian tongues (Scullard 1967, p. 43).

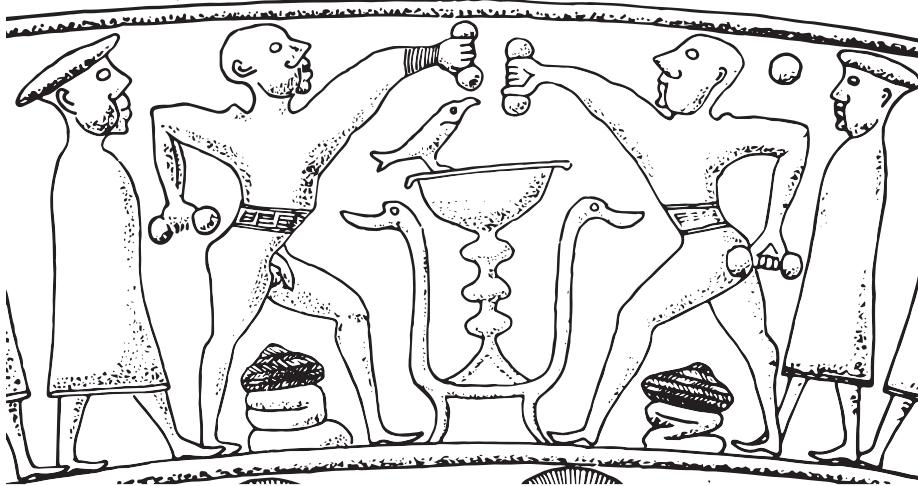


Figure 9: Detail from a situla associated with an Etruscan site in Bologna, now housed at the Rhode Island School of Design (No. 32.245) and known as the Providence Situla.

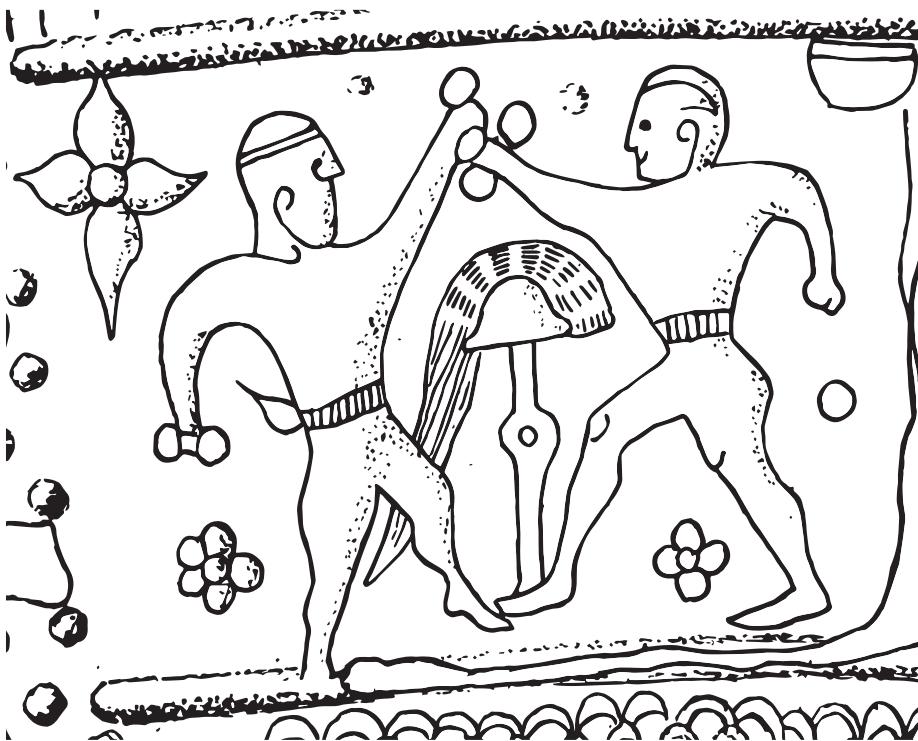


Figure 10: Detail from the Arnoaldi Situla, Archaeological Museum of Bologna, no inventory number.

their thumbs extended. The fighter on the left appears to show the tops of his knuckles, over which a strap extends.

Like most of their toreutic brethren, the Vače boxers are depicted in an offensive posture, with one arm extended to strike and another lowered to the side and/or back. The anatomical rendering of the fighters is somewhat naïve, with improbable placement of the feet vis-à-vis the twisted shoulders and torso. Also, the thumbs of the striking hands are incorrectly rendered on the bottom, rather than the top of the fist (unless the knuckles face the viewer, in which case the arms are rotated in a manner that would make a strike so awkward as to be ineffectual).

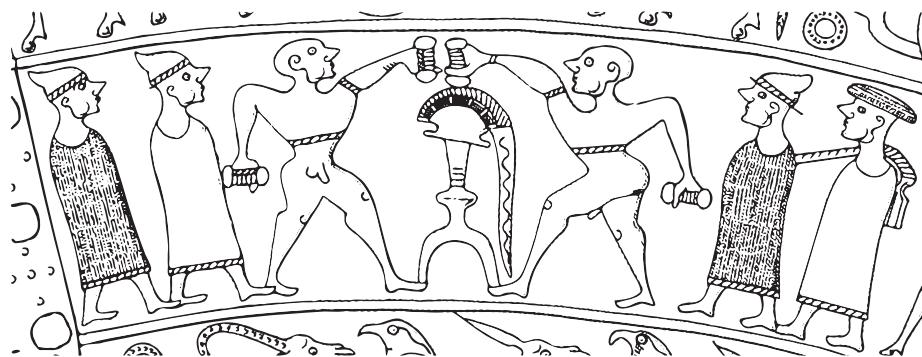


Figure 11: Boxing scene from the Vače Situla, National Museum of Slovenia, No. P-581.

A fragment of a bronze situla from Kobarid (Caporetto/Karfreit), dated to the fifth century BC, is held at the Civico Museo di Storia ed Arte, Trieste (no inventory number) (Lucke and Frey 1962, p. 70). The item presents little information that is new but confirms the high frequency of such features as nudity, the plumed helmet, armband, and *ročka* in representations of boxers in situla art (Figure 12).

The boxers on the Magdalenska Gora Situla (National Museum of Slovenia, No. P-4280; Figure 13) are more lithesome than their counterparts on other East Alpine objects. Instead of a prize, there floats between the pugilists a large rosette surrounded by eighteen petals. The internal structure of the boxers' belts is more evident, consisting of a top and bottom band with vertical striations in the middle. The *ročke* have relatively small, spherical ends. The fighters appear to stride forward. Their noses are pointed up and their chins are sticking out in a vulnerable gesture. Cloaked men wearing hats stand on either side holding long staffs that look almost like hockey sticks.

Fragments of the lid of a floor vessel found at Magdalenska Gora (National Museum of Slovenia, No. P-4282; Figure 14) confirm the basic elements of the toreutic boxing scenes we have observed so far. The belt is clearly present but the raised arms are generally missing, so we cannot be sure if an armband was rendered or not. The plumed helmet appears to rest on a stand. The boxers are bare-headed and bald. An observer, wearing a cap, stands behind the boxer on the left. The lid is apparently not associated with the situla found at Magdalenska Gora (Figure 13).

A bronze fragment from Dolenjske Toplice (Natural History Museum Vienna, No. 56801; not picture here) shows the leg of the boxer on the right along with one of his *ročke*. A 'sec-

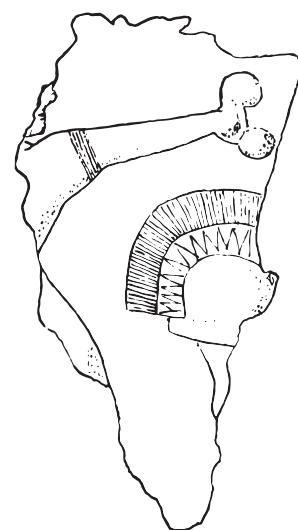


Figure 12: A fragment from a fifth-century bronze situla, found at Kobarid, Slovenia, in 1886. The piece is held in the Civico Museo di Storia ed Arte, Trieste (no inventory number).

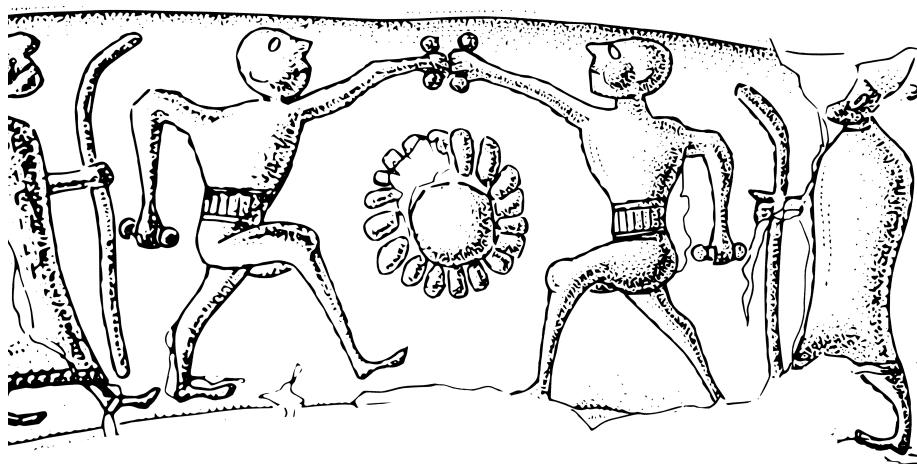


Figure 13: Detail from the Magdalenska Gora situla, National Museum of Slovenia (No. P-4280).

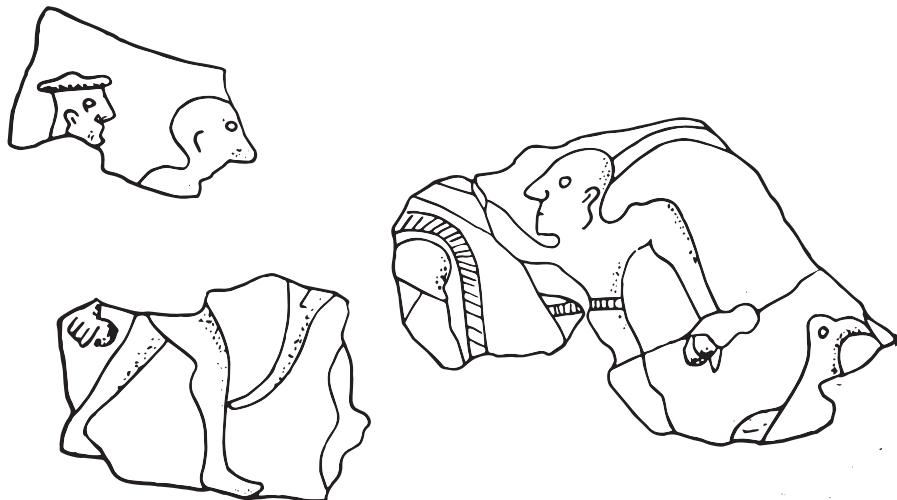


Figure 14: Detail from the lid of an *Etagangefäß* ‘floor vessel’ from Magdalenska Gora, National Museum of Slovenia (No. P-4282). Note: the lid belongs to another vessel which is *not* the same as the one for which detail is provided in Figure 13.

ond’ (*sekundanten*) in a long robe stands behind him (Lucke and Frey 1962, p. 28). Another bronze fragment from Mechel, in northeastern Italy, is held at a museum in Trento identified by Lucke and Frey (1962, p. 67) as the Museo Nazionale (No. 1772).<sup>21</sup> The Mechel fragment, which measures only 2.7 × 1.5 cm, contains the right side of a prize helmet, a bit of the stand it rests on, as well as an arm and a leg of the fighter on the right (Lucke and Frey 1962, p. 67). The dumbbells are not visible. We have not been able to observe the fragmentary boxing scene discovered on pieces of Bronze at Fließ, Austria and have no further information about the object(s).

The boxers in the Sanzeno fragments (Tyrolean State Museum, Innsbruck, No. 16700; Figure 15) are found near an erotic scene, which Frelih (1989, p. 112) equates with the story of Hephaestus capturing Ares and Aphrodite *in flagrante delicto*. Because the Phaeacians sing of this episode and then hold games, including boxing, Frelih makes the argument that the Sanzeno situla might have celebrated the Phaeacian games recorded in Book 8 of the *Odyssey*. The upright and fairly stiff-legged stance of the boxer on the left can be inferred; his dumbbells are visible, as well as a plumed helmed on a stand. The raised *hantel* of the boxer on the right is barely visible.

A clay relief fragment similar in style to the toreutic boxers, was found at Sacchetto in Contrada Sostegno, Italy (Museo Nazionale Atestino, No. 3760; Figure 16). The object comes from a large, thick-walled, yellow vessel, suggesting that the boxers were a popular motif on clay vessels, as well. In the relief, a bald, naked pugilist (the left-hand figure of a pair) stands with exposed genitalia in the familiar East Alpine boxing pose, wielding the dumbbells. Hoernes (1893, p. 108) calls the implement a *schlagwaffe* ‘blunt weapon’. A dumbbell,

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<sup>21</sup>This is most likely now known as the Museo Nazionale Storico degli Alpini.

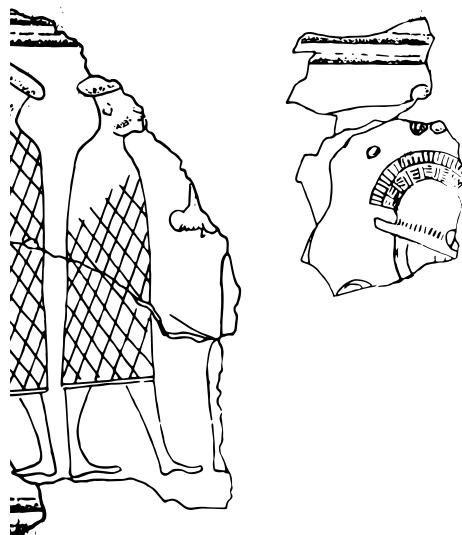


Figure 15: Fragments from a bronze situla, found at Sanzeno, Italy. The pieces are held in the Tyrolean State Museum, Innsbruck (No. 16700). The dumbbells are visible partially above the helmet and in the lowered right hand of the boxer to the left of the helmet. The left arm and right leg of the boxer on the left are also partially visible.

forearm, and the forward leg of the right-hand boxer are also visible. The fragment has been dated to between 500 and 400 BC (Thuillier 1985, p. 173).

As we have seen, the toreutic artists worked within a fairly strict set of conventions in their depictions of boxing.<sup>22</sup> The Mesopotamian and Greek antecedents of these symmetrical figures engaged in combat with a trophy placed between them have been noted by (Frelih 1989, p. 100ff.). While there is some variability, these scenes all have much in common. In most cases, the boxers assume raise one hand, aimed at their opponent, while the other one is dropped and lowered behind them. Details of the chest are absent, so it is not always clear whether we are seeing the torso or the back of the fighter on the right. The detail of the thighs, groin, and buttocks on the Providence Situla, for example, suggests that the fighters have turned their chests towards the viewer, their left feet forward.<sup>23</sup> One foot (when discernible, it is typically the left) projects,<sup>24</sup> the other remains behind—a standard boxing posture that ensures stability in throwing and receiving blows. Indeed, the wide stance assumed by the boxers is one of the reasons we believe they were not merely scuffling to knock a dumbbell out of their opponent's hands. Surely this would not require the wide stance we

<sup>22</sup>Lucke and Frey (1962, p. 27) argue that the pose of the boxers “is not so much an arbitrary possibility of representation, but rather a specific moment of the fight, perhaps a starting position.” They further claim that “the clear juxtaposition of the fighters without overlapping is partly due to the technical situation of the bronzerworker” (translation ours).

<sup>23</sup>Only on the Magdalenska Gora belt plate (Figure 6) does it appear that the boxer on the right is showing his back to the viewer.

<sup>24</sup>The boxer on the right-hand side of the Certosa Situla (Figure 4) appears to put his right foot forward, his genitals faintly visible.



Figure 16: A clay relief fragment from Sacchetto in Contrada Sostegno, Este (Museo Nazionale Atestino, No. 3760).

see in all the toreutic boxers.

Still, there are noteworthy differences between the postures of the East Alpine pugilists. For example, according to Lucke and Frey (1962), the boxers on the Matri and Vače situlae have a “slack posture” (*schlaffe Haltung*) while those on the Providence situla have an “intermediate” one (*eine Mittelstellung einnehmen*). The wide lunge and energetically bent arms of the Kuffarn boxers suggest that it was possible for the artist to capture the temperament of the fight (Lucke and Frey 1962, pp. 27–28). The Vače Situla, on the other hand, shows the boxers in much more static pose: figural symmetry here seems to have been of greater concern to the artist than naturalistic movement.

The character of the Matri boxers’ genitalia has been noted (Merhart 1932, p. 61). Despite the forward swing of the body of the man on the right, his penis and scrotum hang plumb. This contrasts with the boxer on the left, whose genitals seem to move together with his left leg as he strides forward. In most other Alpine boxing depictions, the genitals are either absent (e.g., the Arnoaldi Situla), obscured by the leg (e.g., the Magdalenska Gora situla) or “their immobility stands in contrast to the swing of the body” (e.g., the Magdalenska Gora belt plate).<sup>25</sup> The Matri Situla is also notable in that the prize includes a lance in addition to the ubiquitous helmet.

Are the ithyphallic boxing figures in some situla art, as on the Magdalenska Gora belt plate, intended apotropaically? Stipčević (1981, pp. 68) regards such figures in Illyrian art as “closely related to the cult of the dead.”<sup>26</sup> The horse on the belt buckle is also considered a chthonic animal in Illyrian art (pp. 59–65).

Frelih (1989, p. 107) regards the Sanzeno, Kobarid, and Vače situlae as belonging to the same group because they all appear to fight for a similar helmet, which the author describes

<sup>25</sup> steht ihre Unbeweglichkeit in einem Gegensatz zum Schwung des Körpers (Merhart 1932, p. 61).

<sup>26</sup> “... usko je pozevan sa kultom mrtvih.”

a plume attached to a piece of wool with triangular ornaments. In these examples, Frelih observes, the boxers all wear narrow belts and their left arms are tied below the shoulder with a decorative ribbon. The author believes (p. 1114) the appearance of the plumed helmet in the prize position may be a cultural innovation, post-dating those representations without it.

The toreutic boxers occur in the context of feasts, ceremony, and music also limned on the situlae. One critic has written that such “scenes from life are selected whose character, being episodic, places them beyond time and a given milieu” (Mansuelli 1965, p. xxviii). While we agree that the teurotic erotica, for example, are indeed timeless, this is less true of the boxing, which subscribes to conventions (e.g., the *hanteln*, the belts, the armbands) unique to the Alpine Iron Age. We also tend to disagree with the author when he writes that toreutic art “consciously held to a concrete, everyday reality” (Mansuelli 1965, p. xxx). This claim seems to disregard the the fantastic beasts that appear, e.g., on the Benvenuti Situla. As for oft-cited Greek influence on the “formal toreutic culture” of the Alps, while it is plausible, “we have no assurance beyond the fact that the Adriatic Sea [sic.] was the medium by which such influence was transferred” (Mansuelli 1965, p. xxx).

Frelih (1989, p. 114) opines that the boxing scene originally possessed some older mythic background (*starejše mitsko ozadje*) but that repetition of the scene in toreutic art led to loss of important details. This “disintegration” came about due to an “increasingly weak awareness of the primary substantive basis of the motif” (translation ours).

We conscientiously avoid calling these objects *halteres*, since Greek jumping weights had a different shape and different purpose (Thuillier 1985, p. 263), though some believe that they are precisely what the Hallstatt boxers carry. Lucke and Frey (1962, pp. 26–27) refer to them as ‘hand protectors’ (*Handschützen*) and argue that they never had the same shape as Greek *halteres* (*nie genau diese Form gehabt haben*). Merhart (1932, p. 61, fn. 1), for example, wonders whether Alpine people confused different forms of Greek athletics in their representations, and so mixed the *halteres* in with boxing. We find this solution inadequate, particularly because there are other indications that the practice was ubiquitous throughout the region and included non-Greek conventions, including the belt, the armbands, and the pectoral crosses of the figurines, as well as the baldness of situla boxers. According to one author, Mediterranean boxing was “probably adjusted to local preferences and rules” in Iron Age Central Europe (Rebay-Salisbury 2012, p. 194).

Per Lucke and Frey (1962, p. 29), when Greek representations of boxing finally penetrated the southeastern Alps, pugilism already existed there. While efforts to depict boxing on vessels was influenced by Greek culture, Alpine boxing was itself autochthonous.<sup>27</sup> Hoernes (1893, p. 110) ponders whether Alpine representations of boxing were not directly influenced by the stylistically similar cylinder seals of Cyprus and the ancient Near East (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b;d).

Lucke and Frey (1962, p. 29) make strong claims about the social status of the Alpine pugilists, paying special regard to the clothes carefully folded beneath them on the Providence Situla and the war helmets that appear frequently in many of the other depictions. These, they argue, are sure signs that the boxers could not have been slaves.<sup>28</sup> We are not convinced by this. We have no evidence that slaves wore no clothes, or even hats, in this cul-

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<sup>27</sup> Als bei diesen südliche Darstellungen emdrangen, war ihnen der Faustkampf längst bekannt, allerdings obne daß sie bis dahin gestrebt hatten, ihn bildlich wiederzugeben.

<sup>28</sup> The authors exhibit this concern about social status, we suppose, because of the later Italic development of gladiatorial contests between slaves and criminals.

ture. In fact, the only naked figures on the situlae are either in the act of making love or boxing. Hats are worn even by figures regarded as attendants. Lucke and Frey (1962, p. 29) wonder, “What did a helmet mean to the victor if he wasn’t a free man who was allowed to take up arms himself?” We question this reasoning, which seems overly influenced by Greek notions of citizenship. Perhaps in this culture enslaved men, victorious in a ritual boxing match, were set free and then sent to war. Or perhaps slaves were routinely used as warriors. While we do not stake much on the status of the fighters (the boxers on the Providence Situla may have been prestigious duelists settling a score), we are skeptical that this can be determined based on the scant evidence about Eastern Alpine culture in the Iron Age.

We agree with Lucke and Frey (1962, p. 29) when they claim that the helmets distinguish situla art from Greek models.<sup>29</sup> Only the Matrei Situla seems to reflect a kind of tripod or cauldron, the typical Greek prize from the era. The prize object in the Providence Situla may be a kind of drinking vessel, but the stand it rests on, adorned with avian heads, is reminiscent of Celtic and La Tène art. Moreover, the position of the Alpine boxers’ arms does not correspond to any Greek models. Long crooks and double-rods appear in the hands of some participants in the boxing scenes, which is more suggestive of Greek influence than perhaps anything else. We note, however, that in New World boxing traditions, whipping or lashing the fighters is not uncommon, and is almost certainly uninfluenced by Ancient Greek custom (Zorich 2008).

The dumbbells represent an important albeit neglected innovation in the history of western boxing. Though many classicists appear to have discounted them as fantastic weapons not actually used in fights, their attestation is frequent enough in situla art to suggest that they were an important element in boxing of northern Italy and the eastern Alps. Indeed, we argue that these instruments are functionally related to the later development of the various weaponized *cæstus* used throughout the Mediterranean into Late Antiquity. The slaughter of the bull at the conclusion of the Aeneidean boxing match (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023) may suggest a repudiation of ancient Italic custom, by which the brains of a man would be scattered using the dumbbells. Better to do this to a an animal, Vergil opines, and he has the victorious boxer do just this to the bull.

The so-called ‘Celtic hypothesis’ has suffered over the past 50 years based on evidence suggesting the genetic diversity of mainland European populations (including the Hallstatt people) known to scholars for hundreds of years merely as ‘Celts’. Despite this, we adopt the traditional view that the culture which produced the boxing situlae mentioned above had some cultural affinity with the Celts of Gaul described in Classical Antiquity. Customs of the Gaulish Celts were committed to history by the Greek polymath Posidonius in the first century BC, though his observations survive only in fragments copied by others. One such fragment describes single combat that took place at Celtic festivities (*deipnon* ‘meal’) (Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists* 4.40). The author uses terms associated with pugilism elsewhere in Greek literature, viz., *skiamachy* ‘shadow-boxing’ and *monomachy* ‘single-combat’. Interestingly, the account does not explicitly mention weapons in the duel.<sup>30</sup> Instead, the rivals were said to ‘struggle at arm’s length’ *akrocheirizomai*, the same term used by Philostratus in connection with the Greek combat sports (*Gym.* 36). This struggle roused the Celtic fighting blood (*erethizo*) to the point where the two men verged on killing each other if not

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<sup>29</sup> Die Art des Kampfpreises erweist somit erneut die Selbständigkeit der Darstellungen auf den Situlen.

<sup>30</sup> A *xiphos* ‘sword’ is referenced later in the anecdote, but this weapon is used in connection with a sacrificial victim remunerated (in advance) for having his throat slit—not one of the mutual combatants.

prevented by the gathered spectators. Evidently, the spectators did not always intervene. The festive nature of Gaulish monomachy is likely mirrored in the Benvenuti (umbewhile Este) and Providence Situlae, where spectators drink as they watch the fights.<sup>31</sup>

It is possible that the Celtic monomachy Posidonius witnessed was in fact a boxing match, though it bore little resemblance to Greek *pygmachia* in terms of its conventions. It is unfortunate that Posidonius (or his copyist) has not provided us with more details regarding this uniquely Celtic agon.<sup>32</sup> While the evidence is not particularly strong, the account of Posidonius gives us some reason to suppose that the Gaulish Celts boxed, perhaps aided by the deadly *hanteln* engraved on numerous situlae of the eastern Alps and northern Italy, argued by many to be the Celtic homeland.

Regarding the prizes limned on the Alpine situlae Lucke and Frey (1962, pp. 28–29, translation ours):

The shape of the kettle, which stands between the pugilists on Providence No. 1 as a prize, has already been discussed in the treatment of the foot kettle. On all other depictions, except Magdalenenberg No. 22 (Plate 69), where a rosette fills the space between the boxers, and Benvenuti No. 7 (Plate 65), where the depiction of a prize of victory remains doubtful because of the small space, it is a helmet on a pedestal, which waves to the winner as a prize, on Matrei No. 42 (plate 58) also a lance. In order to understand the mentality of the inhabitants of the south-eastern Alps, it would be important to know what social position the pugilists occupy, especially whether they are professional fighters at shows or free people who are honored to take part in competitions. The preferred battle price provides information: because what did a helmet mean to the victor if he wasn't a free man who was allowed to take up arms himself. There is isolated confirmation of this in Situla Providence No. 1 (Plate 7), | where their robes lie folded between the legs of the fighters, on top of the high cart, which leaves no doubt as to the free position of its bearer.

Before we conclude, we mention several bronze relief figurines<sup>33</sup> discovered in Austria's Tyrolean Oberland and today housed at the Tyrolean State Museum, Innsbruck (Nos. 3752–3755, illustrated in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)). These are by all indications sculptural examples of the same boxers depicted on the situlae (Egg 1980). The figures hold the *hanteln* with their arms outstretched. The objects have enlarged, rounded ends in one case (Figure 17-c) but are merely cylindrical in others. One of the boxers wears a helmet (Figure 17-c), while the others are bare-headed, if not bald (Figure 18, for example, is probably depicted with a head of hair, given the striations on what might otherwise be regarded as a cap). The figurines, characterized as *Caestuskämpfer*, were discovered at Landeck in the Austrian Tyrol (Merhart 1932, pp. 57–58).<sup>34</sup> They were likely used as votive offerings (Egg 1980, p. 57). One author argues that their erect penises are intended to indicate that they are naked rather than

<sup>31</sup>One appears to have fallen asleep (Rebay-Salisbury 2012, p. 191).

<sup>32</sup>Posidonius goes on to recount that in times past, two brave Celts might wind up fighting to the death (*mechri thanaton*) in this manner for no greater reason than to claim a thigh-bone at table.

<sup>33</sup>The reverse side of the figurines is flat and bears no detail.

<sup>34</sup>The site is very close to Fließ, where a bronze sheet depicting boxers was also found. In Figure 1, only Fließ is shown.

aroused (ibid., p. 61).<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, Merhart does not suggest a date for these objects, known as the *Landecker Caestuskämpfer*; however, he does refer to them as descendants of the situla boxers (p. 63) and this view is also espoused by Egg (1980, p. 58).<sup>36</sup> Egg concludes his presentation of the relief figurines by stating that they are “a part of the tradition of the Hallstatt period” and their production indicates “the survival and further development of Hallstatt-age elements in the younger Iron-Age Alpine region” (ibid., translation ours).

Several of the figurines (Figure 17 a–c) wear a pectoral cross (*brustkreuz*) but no armband or belt as on the situlæ. The boxer in Figure 17(b) does not hold the dumbbells; his fingers are represented, though somewhat hastily (his left hand appears to have six digits). His scrotum is distinguished, as it is in most cases of situla boxers, at least when the genitalia are rendered. The other *Caestuskämpfer* lack a scrotum. For the same figure, there are traces of iron on the left side of the pectoral cross, suggesting how the detail was laid in at the time the bronze was still molten (Mehart 1932, p. 59). The details of the faces, though subtle, were probably cut in to the figurines after being cast (ibid., pp. 58–59).

The bronze figurines carry their arms differently than the situla boxers, who characteristically raise one arm to the opponent and maintain the other fist pointed at the ground, elbow bent. The bronze figures, by contrast, have outstretched arms with level shoulders. While the gesture of the figurines could be an authentic representation—perhaps indicating wide, looping hooks—it seems to us more likely that the artist simply wished to represent the formal notion of striking with the outstretched fists. It is also possible that rendering a more naturalistic pose was beyond his ability.

The helmeted boxer depicted in Figure 17(c) also has no parallel among the situla pugilists. The boxer in (b) may wear a cap, whereas the amorphous head of (d) is most likely overfilled and somewhat botched (like the penis). The glabrous head of (a) suggests he is bald, like his boxing brethren on the situlæ. The pectoral cross is unique to the figurines; cross-shaped designs are also featured on several bronze pendants representing adorants, with their hands raised (Mehart 1932, p. 62). Given this evidence, it is hard to characterize the boxers as mere athletes. We believe they are engaged in fist-fighting as a form of devotion—the sacrifice of their own body or that of their opponent—to satisfy the numina that brooded over the bent world of their ‘ring’.

We conclude that a coherent boxing practice was attested as late as the fifth century BC in the Eastern Alps. By this time, Greek colonists had reached up the Balkan coastline, perhaps as far as modern-day Croatia. Their influence on East Alpine boxing cannot be ruled out. However, the culture that produced the bronze situlæ and other toreutic and figural representations of boxers in that region evidently held to a set of conventions that differed greatly from that of Greek *pygmaichia*. Most importantly, the boxers used fist-load weapons which cannot be discounted as fantastical or as a misinterpretation of the Greek *halteres*. If the ubiquitous dumbbells of the Eastern Alps were heavy, as we suspect, then we can reach no other conclusion than that boxing among Iron Age Alpine people entailed the deliberate fracturing of skulls, like boxing among the ancient Maya (Taube and Zender 2009, Taube

<sup>35</sup> Merhart’s (1932) argument is that the figurine artists did not have the skill to limn the genitals within the outline of the body, as in several of the toreutic representations, and so they rendered the penis in silhouette. We note that a somewhat unsatisfactory attempt (*ziemlich mißglückt*, p. 61) has been made to render the genitals within the outline of the body for Figure 17(b), the only figure for which a scrotum has been depicted, as well. A belt may also be represented across this figure’s waistline (ibid., p. 62).

<sup>36</sup> ...ihre abstammung von diesen bleibt doch klar (Mehart 1932, p. 63).

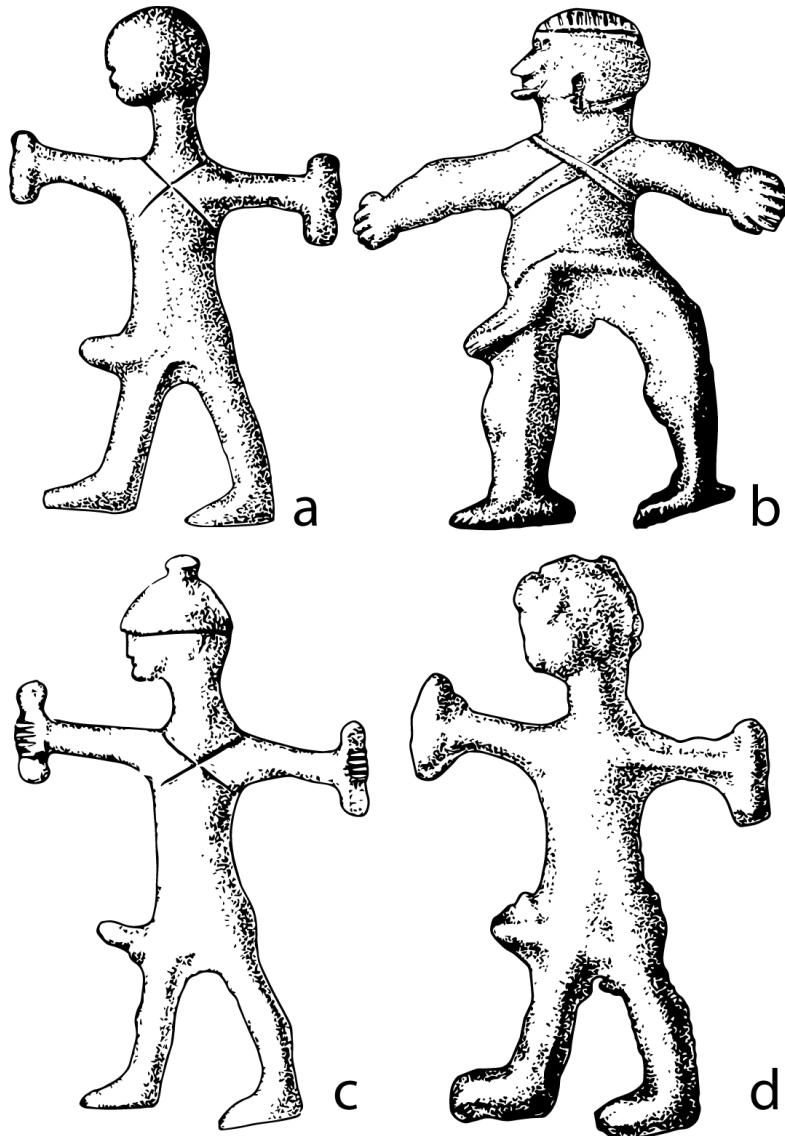


Figure 17: Bronze relief figurines of boxers held at the Tyrolean State Museum, Innsbruck (a = No. 3754; b = 3752; c = 3755; d = 3753). The reverse side of the figurines is essentially flat, with no detail.

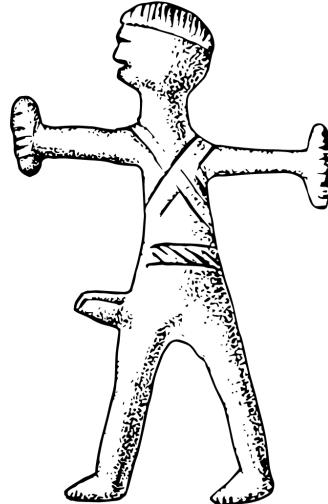


Figure 18: Another *Cæstuskämpfer* relief figurine, housed at the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, Mainz (no inventory number). The item was reportedly found in western Hungary but this is disputed (Egg 1980).

2018). Boxing in the Iron-Age Alps had an overtly sacrificial character and its influence was widespread. We believe that this deadly form of boxing was transmitted to the Etruscans, who appear to have valued situla art enough to include it among their own grave goods. As we will see in the next section, the Etruscans developed a form of boxing associated with ritual killing and funerary ritual consistent with our hypothesis regarding the boxers represented in the bronze artwork of the Eastern Alps.

### 3 Etruria

The Etruscans were a non-Indo-European-speaking people whose core homeland was located in central Italy. Their origins have remained mysterious despite millennia of speculation (including by Herodotus, who reported their ancestors were Lydian refugees of famine). As the Iron Age wore on, the Etruscans spread far enough northeast to interact with the culture that produced the toreutic art of the Eastern Alps (Section 2). The Etruscans included East Alpine situlae among their own precious grave goods in locations like the Arnoaldi and Cerstosa Necropoli (Figures 10 and 4). This has led some to speculate that the Etruscans were themselves the producers of the situla art. While we have taken the position that the situlae were fabricated by an autochthonous Alpine culture that engaged in dumbbell boxing, the evidence is still insufficient to reach a definitive conclusion on the matter. Others will doubtless continue to characterize the situla art, and therefore dumbbell boxing, as Etruscan.

Even for those who consider the use of the curious *hanteln* peripheral to Etruria, boxing was “by far the most popular sport” among the Etruscans (Thuillier 1985, p. 267). In the present section, we will explore the material culture of boxing in pre-Roman central Italy.

While not everyone agrees that East Alpine boxing was a bloody affair intended as a form of human sacrifice, there is less ambivalence about Etruscan boxing. There is more support for the view that it included elements of ritual killing. These elements were magnified by the Romans, who ultimately assimilated their Etruscan rivals in the late first millennium BC.

The story of Etruscan boxing—indeed, of Etruscan culture in general—cannot be told without some reference to the centuries-long encounter between the Etruscans and their Greek neighbors. Hellenic settlers began arriving in Italy in the eighth century BC and surely commenced interactions with the Etruscans, whom they called Tyrrhenians, soon after. Nearly thirty thousand pieces of Greek pottery, many produced in Attica and shipped to Italy, have been reclaimed from Etruscan tombs. Indeed, it is widely believed that the Greeks produced pottery explicitly for their Tyrrhenian clientele, painting them with themes of local interest—including boxing (Osborne 2001). We argue that some features of Etruscan boxing were highlighted in Greek pottery destined for the Italian market, including the shedding of blood and, occasionally, the clothing of the boxers. We therefore include in this section some pottery manufactured on the Greek mainland because it was discovered in central Italy and may have reflected Etruscan tastes in the depiction of boxing. To separate Greek and Etruscan representations of boxing on any item produced in Greece, however, is surely a tenuous proposition. We admit that, with good reason, some may prefer a general discussion of Hellenic boxing that includes all Greek pottery, regardless of its findspot.

Despite the *non liquet* of binding Greek pottery to Etruscan culture, we can be reasonably certain that frescoes painted on tomb walls in pre-Roman central Italy represent an *echt* Etruscan notion of boxing. Here, too, the lines blur as these representations extend farther south into Lucania, given the stronger Hellenic influences of *Magna Graecia* (Section 4). We provide no alcahest for debates concerning the depth of Greek influence on Etruscan material culture, noting merely the patterns we observe among artifacts associated with boxing in pre-Roman central Italy.<sup>37</sup>

The Plicaśna<sup>38</sup> Situla (Figure 19), found at Chiusi, is a gilt-silver vessel that may depict boxers. The boxers, wearing a garment across their buttocks that may represent a loincloth, approach each other on the sides of a larger-than-life chalice (the position where prizes are frequently found in Greek and Etruscan depictions of pugilism). Both arms are uplifted; the boxer on the right seems to direct his fists towards his opponent. Perhaps because the figures are separated from one another, it is not obvious to all critics that they are, in fact, boxing (Thuillier 1985, pp. 65–68).<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, the aggressive posture of the boxers, as well as the presence of aolists (nearly ubiquitous in later Etruscan and Lucanian depictions)<sup>40</sup> and the chalice-prize make a fairly strong case that what we observe on the Plicaśna Situla is indeed a representation of pugilism. The visual momentum of the scene, with the boxers and prize as centrally-located elements, also lead to this conclusion. Figures surrounding the boxers include musicians, as previously mentioned, as well as warriors wearing plumed helmets and

<sup>37</sup> We take the position that fist fighting need not be borrowed by any group since orthograde, ritual combat is likely a primitive of our erect, symbolically-oriented species (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022a). So, while we may be accused of “splitting” rather than “lumping” when it comes to the typology of ancient boxing, one advantage of our approach is to clearly separate the evidence according to the geographic region, if not culture, that produced it. Those who come after us may reasonably decide to merge some of the distinctions we found boethetic.

<sup>38</sup> The Etruscan name *Plicaśna* appears twice on the object.

<sup>39</sup> Freligh (1989, p. 110) argues that the vessel is not Etruscan, but a Phoenician–Cypriot product dating to the initial contact between the Etruscans and traders from the Middle East in around 650 BC.

<sup>40</sup> The flute player was known in Etruscan as *suptu*, doubtless derived from Latin *subulo*, (Thuillier 2017, p. 226).

armed with sword and spear, as well as men carrying sheep on their shoulders, as to a sacrifice. The figures immediately adjacent to the boxers have no particular identifying features. They are dressed as the boxers are, with their hands in a lowered albeit aggressive gesture. They may represent a second set of boxers eager to fight.



Figure 19: Detail of the Plicaśna Situla, found at Chiusi. Dated to around 650 BC, not all agree that the central figures are in fact boxing. If they are, however, then this is certainly one of the earliest representations of pugilism in Etruria.

Another candidate for the oldest representation of boxing among the Etruscans is found on a bucchero amphora now in Wiesbaden (Figure 20). The boxers, presumably naked, cross uplifted arms while maintaining the other arm lowered, elbow bent, at waist level. The prize position is occupied by a tripod holding a cauldron. A *suplu* plays his pipes to the left of the fighters.<sup>41</sup> To their right appears a representation of Theseus slaying the Minotaur. To the left of the musician we find an extensive scene depicting Orestes' slaughter of Clytemnestra and Agisthus (Thuillier 1985, p. 112). The mythological contest is intriguing, suggesting that the boxing itself represents a mythological scene, perhaps the bout between Apollo and Hercules over the Delphic tripod (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d).

The presence of aolists in these early Etruscan depictions of boxing may represent the origins of a long tradition seemingly unique to Italy, if not to Etruria. While various forms of music are found in representations of boxing going back to the ancient Near East (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b), the Etruscans were particular to include the *suplu* wherever boxers were duking it out.<sup>42</sup> Flute players appear repeatedly in Etruscan and Lucanian tomb painting, for example (see below). According to Thuillier (2017, p. 226), several ancient authors, including Eratosthenes and Alcimus, noted the Etruscan penchant for combining music and fighting, a trait they called *τρυφή*, suggesting Etruscan softness and effeminacy. Thuillier draws an apt connection to (modern) Thai kickboxing, in which musicians “provide a rhythm for the blows of the two combatants and even...stir up their zeal for the fight” (*ibid.*).

Pausanias, in his *Description of Greece*, briefly describes a scene depicting the funeral games of Pelias. He refers to a flute player in the context of a boxing match (5.17.10): “Those who have boldly ventured [*ἀποτολμάω*] to box [*πυκτεύω*] are Admetus and Mopsus, the son of Ampyx. Between them stands a man playing the flute [*ἐπαυλέω*], as in our day they are accustomed to play the flute when the competitors in the pentathlon are jumping” (Jones et al. 1918). This may suggest that Pausanias regarded musical accompaniment (at boxing matches) as archaic; he is believed to have written during the second century AD. To be sure,

<sup>41</sup>The sack hanging from the instrument is interpreted as their ‘carrying case’ (*étau*) by Thuillier (1985, p. 112).

<sup>42</sup>The Tomba delle Bighe, notable for heavy Greek influence on its iconography, is one of the few exceptions, where boxers are depicted without a musical accompanist (Thuillier 2017, p. 626). Demonstrating the perennial confusion over terms for ancient boxing handgear, Skutsch (1985) claims that the boxers in the Tomba delle Bighe wear the Roman *cestus*, then parenthetically clarifies: “or perhaps only leather strips.”

the aolist is not exclusive to Etruscan sport (Thuillier 1985, p. 231) but the connection between boxing and flute-playing in Etruria was *plus étroite* ‘tighter’ than anywhere else in the ancient world (*ibid.*, p. 246). While flute-playing seemed to generally accompany athletics in Greece, among the Etruscans it was strictly associated with boxing (*ibid.*, p. 247–248).

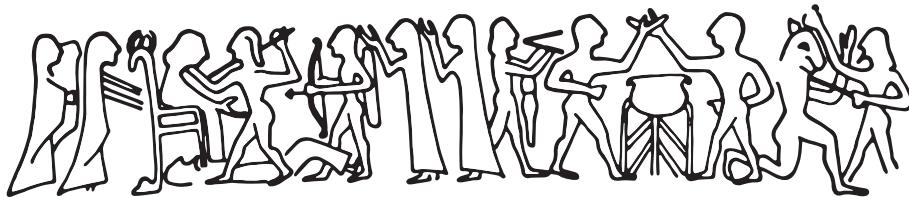


Figure 20: Detail of a bucchero cylindrical amphora dated to 600–575 BC. Now in a collection in Wiesbaden, the piece originated in Chiusi. While the scenes to the left and the right of the boxers are probably mythological, it is not clear which mythological boxing match may be represented by the pugilists.

Two other early (seventh-century) visual representations of pugilism are found on Etruscan pottery. A bucchero olpe found at Cerveteri (Figure 21) includes on its surface a depiction of the Medea myth. Figures carry what may be the golden fleece. Nearby, two boxers throw punches, landing them on each others’ chest or shoulders.<sup>43</sup> The figures wear their hair long and may be clad in loincloths (Bonfante and Bonfante 2002, p. 134).<sup>44</sup> The front legs are bent sharply at the knee, effectively communicating the posture of a boxer as he strikes. The back feet are poised on the ball or tiptoe. The boxer on the right even raises his foot slightly off the ground as he throws a right hand—a technique abjured by modern boxing coaches since it weakens the blow. The olpe is evidence, for Thuillier (2017, p. 222), of “Etruscan interest in pugilism already in the 630s.”

A bucchero vase found at Veii (Figure 22) is dated to the last third of the seventh century BC. Boxers on the vase wear armbands, suggesting some relation to the Alpine boxers described in Section 2. Unlike those fighters, however, these have hair. They are naked, though no genitalia are limned. The boxer on the right has some indication of a garment wrapping around his loins, but it does not fully circumscribe his waist.<sup>45</sup> The prize position contains an elaborate, winged stand with nothing placed atop it. Is it a tripod (there are only two feet) or a chair? Thuillier (1985, p. 61) suggests that it may be a curule seat (*sella curulis*), a foldable and transportable chair used by certain office holders in Ancient Rome. A vegetal motif, perhaps a leafy cypress branch, stands to the left.<sup>46</sup> Each boxer bears one hand aggressively

<sup>43</sup> The relation between the golden fleece and boxing recalls the *Argonautica*’s boxing match between Polydeuces and Amycus may be represented here. However, there is nothing in the iconography of the boxers themselves to further substantiate this hypothesis. There is no clear difference in age or size between the fighters, for example.

<sup>44</sup> The stylization of the male breasts on the left figure suggest that the circles drawn on the hips are meant merely to communicate roundness and depth, not clothing.

<sup>45</sup> One observer regards the boxers as clothed in a *maillot-tunique* ‘jersey-tunic’ but we are not convinced (Thuillier 1985, p. 60). Thuillier goes on to claim that this garb is “doubtless of Minoan origin” (*ibid.*, translation ours). Unfortunately, the Veii vase has been lost, so closer inspection of the artifact is currently impossible. In a later publication (in English), Thuillier (2017, p. 223) states that the Veii boxes wear “singlets.”

<sup>46</sup> “It is well known that the cypress has long been associated with death” (Thuillier 1985, p. 61, translation ours).

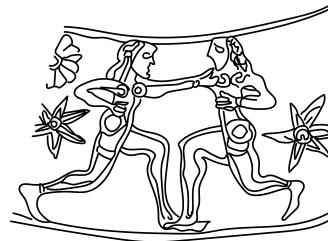


Figure 21: Detail of seventh-century bucchero olpe found at Cerveteri. Depicted are scenes of the Medea myth and attendants carrying what may be the golden fleece and there are inscriptions in Etruscan. Two boxers fight.

aloft, with the other bent at the chest, fist raised. The legs are bent and the fighters stand on the balls of their feet or on tiptoe.

Surrounding the boxers on the vase are a number of fantastic beasts, including griffins and sphinges, many in the act of devouring other animals or people. A gracefully-rendered human leg dangles from the mouth of a lion, for example. Here too, we find a connection to toreutic art of the Alps, viz., the Cerstosa Situla, on which boxers stand atop beasts of ravin—though in that case the animals appear to be sculptural features of the furniture.<sup>47</sup>

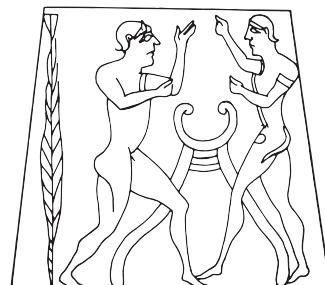


Figure 22: Drawing of boxers on a bucchero vase found at Veii and dated to between 633 and 600 BC. The original has been lost, but a detailed drawing was produced by S. Campanari in 1839.

Two sixth-century bronze belt-buckles found near Siena (Figure 23) are decorated in repoussé with boxers. The scenes are influenced by both Greek and Near Eastern models. We note, in particular, the loincloths,<sup>48</sup> characteristic of the earliest Near Eastern antecedents (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b); as well as the tripod and carefully-rendered *bimantes*,

This element, coupled with the fantastic predators surrounding the boxers, may suggest a funereal and/or sacrificial character to the match.

<sup>47</sup> Thuillier (1985, p. 59) regards this iconography as characteristic of Etruscan culture.

<sup>48</sup> Thuillier (1985, pp. 117, 671) claims the garments are *crétois* (by which he means ‘Minoan’) in part because they leave the buttocks largely uncovered. See Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2022c) for discussion of the athletic dress of Minoan boxers.

both Greek features. Thuillier (1985, p. 574–575), who notes the conspicuous length of the boxers' tresses (down to their shoulders), argues that long hair is disruptive to the unfolding of a boxing match, as we have observed in more general terms elsewhere (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022a).

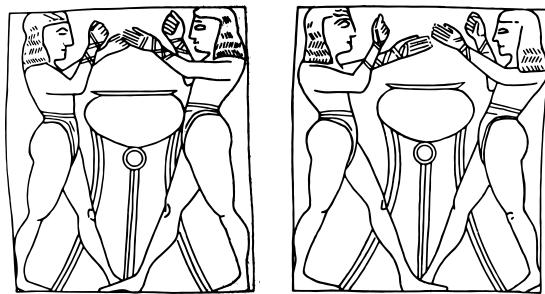


Figure 23: Etruscan belt buckles found near Siena (Casole d'Elsa), dated 575–550 BC. The iconography of the boxing scenes appears to draw from a variety of ancient traditions.

A bronze vessel (British Museum No. 1855,0816.1; Figure 24) known as the Barone Lebes contains images of beasts wild and fantastical, chariot races, wrestlers, and at least one pair of boxers. These are flanked on the left by an official wielding a rod and a looped object and on the right by a *suplu* playing his instrument. The looped object is perhaps a victor's wreath, but it may also represent the *bimantes*. Curiously, the official is nude, an unprecedented characteristic for such a figure. He may be another boxer, waiting his turn to fight and acting emethen as a referee on an improvised basis (Thuillier 1985, p. 153, fn. 45).

The leftmost pair of boxers, flanked by the officiator and the musician, are evidently *in articulo pugnae*, with both hands raised and their feet spread apart. The boxer on the left, who is throwing a punch, has also raised his back foot onto its ball. The fighter on the right raises both hands in an apparent gesture of defense. The other set of boxers have reached the climax of their contest; the crouching figure on the right appears to raise one finger in sign of his defeat. All of the boxers are naked.

The conventions of the fights on the Barone Lebes—including the raised finger that signals submission—leave no doubt as to the pollent Greek influence on the vessel's decoration. However, the surrounding chariot races, the *suplu*, and the preoccupation with fantastic beasts all mark the vessel definitively as an Etruscan artifact. The Barone Lebes was found at Capua and is dated to the beginning of the fifth century BC.

The boxer's *hanteln*, described in Section 2, reappear in the hands of a gorgon in Etruscan art.<sup>49</sup> The scene on a sixth-century Etruscan amphora (Figure 25) depicts a fugacious sister of Medusa wielding the dumbbells. From Medusa's decapitated trunk, at right, spring the aliferous horses Pegasus and Chrysaor. Why Medusa's sister holds these implements remains a puzzle. Is she chasing after Perseus, her sister's murderer, preparing to deal him a deadly blow? The gorgons were known to have brass hands (Oktapoda 2011, p. 538), which may link them to the (presumably metal) *hanteln* used in the Alpine boxing tradition (Pseudo-

<sup>49</sup>The dumbbells are reportedly visible in art discovered in Asia Minor, as well (Bonfante 2011).

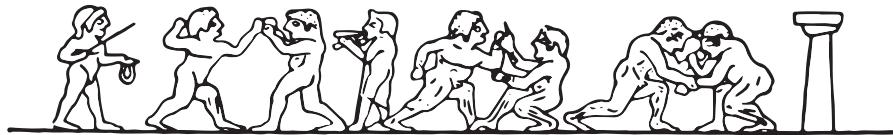


Figure 24: Detail of the Barone Lebes featuring boxers (British Museum No. 1855,0816.1). Evidently Etruscan, the Lebes was found at Capua and is dated 500–480 BC.



Figure 25: Detail of an Etruscan amphora formerly held at the J. Paul Getty Museum and now repatriated to Rome. The Gorgon at left holds the *hanteln*. The depiction is attributed to the Painter of Tityos, likely produced at Vulci, and dated to 530–510 BC.

Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 2.38–46).

A late sixth-century Attic stamnos found at Vulci is remarkable in its depiction of boxers accounted in the *zōma* (Figure 26). This feature stands out because the evidence of clothing in Greek boxing scenes is otherwise quite rare (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d). The painting does not likely represent the Iliadic games: the other side depicts satyrs and mænads and the upper register, a symposium. Another late sixth-century boxing scene (this time on a kantharos with one handle; Bibliothèque National de France, No. DE RIDDER.354) shows the boxers naked but the *ephedros* wears a *zōma*. The runners and jumpers in the scene also wear a loincloth. The preference for clothed athletes may reflect local tastes, as the one-handled kantharos was also discovered at Vulci, though apparently manufactured in Attica. It is worth noting, however, that in this depiction, even with plenty of loincloth-wearing athletes, the boxers are still naked. The Etruscans used nudity to suggest divinity or for apotropaic purposes (Bonfante 2011). Boxers are clothed in relatively few representations but the frequency

of clothed boxers in Etruria seems greater than in Greek art destined for the Greek market (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d).



Figure 26: A late sixth-century Attic stamnos depicting boxers wearing the *zōma* (lower left). The vessel was found in Vulci and is now held by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (No. DE RIDDER.252).

A Panathenaic amphora dated to around 510 BC (Museo nazionale etrusco di Villa Giulia, No. 50680) shows a referee or trainer striking a boxer who has gotten his opponent in an indefensible position (which the English boxers would later term *chancery*), presumably to motivate the other boxer's release (Poliakoff 1983, p. 85). The vessel was found at the Cerveteri Necropolis though it was produced in Athens by the Munich Painter (Beazley 1956, 394.10).

An Etruscan bronze statuette (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, No. BRONZE.101), probably of Apollo, may depict him in the form of a boxer (Figure 27).<sup>50</sup> He wears on his right arm (the left is missing) a garment that has been described as a mutilated chlamys. We interpret this object as five strips dangling from the figure's forearm, as in a Greek vase painting illustrated in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2022d). We believe these are *himantes*. The figure wears a necklace, a bracelet on the left arm, laced boots, and a garland on his head. The left leg bears an inscription in Etruscan: "I am the statue, or votive offering, (which) Fast Rufriš gave according to ritual to Artemis Spulare on behalf of her son".<sup>51</sup> The figure is

<sup>50</sup>Because it was once in the collection of the Dukes of Ferrara, the piece is known in French as "Apollon de Ferrare".

<sup>51</sup>*mi flerēs spulare artimi fasti rufriš t(u)rce clen ceha* (Bonfante and Bonfante 2002, p. 165).

dated 350–300 BC.



Figure 27: The Apollon de Ferrare (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, No. BRONZE.101). This late fourth-century Etruscan bronze may be the only surviving representation of Apollo the Boxer. The figure arguably holds *himantes* on his right arm and wears laced boots, as well as a necklace and a bracelet on his left bicep.

Boxers depicted on at least four Etruscan funerary stelæ found at Bologna are arguably participating in games intended to celebrate the deceased (Sacchetti 2011).<sup>52</sup> The more than 230 stelæ from Bologna—sometimes described as ‘tombstones’—may be dated from as early as the eighth century to as late as the fourth century BC (Whitehouse 2013). They are made of sandstone and carved in low relief. On Ducati Stele 10 (Figure 28), the boxer on the right appears to hold an oblong object in his left hand (Thuillier 1985, p. 145). The pillar that stands between the fighters recalls the iconography of Near Eastern cylinder seals (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b).

Boxing in Etruria is well documented in frescoes painted on the walls of thirteen tombs (540–480 BC).<sup>53</sup> These boxing matches have attracted considerable attention because of their ubiquity. There is no critical consensus on whether the boxers painted in these tombs were regarded metaphorically, e.g., as guardians of the deceased, or as depictions of actual events, like funeral games (Jannot 1985, Jazwa 2020). It could be both. Like (Thuillier 1985), we prefer the simple explanation that the frescoes primarily depict actual boxing matches that were associated with Etruscan funerals. While many have argued that boxing—and the concomitant shedding of human blood—is a central aspect of the Etruscan mortuary cultus, others are more reticent. Krauskopf (2006, p. 66), for example, has argued that “we will never be able to fit ... every picture painted on a tomb wall into the framework of a logically consistent

<sup>52</sup>The stelæ include nos. 2, 10, 15, and 169, described originally by Ducati (1911; 1943) and later by Thuillier (1985, pp. 144–147).

<sup>53</sup>The tombs are Auguri, Iscrizioni, Cardarelli, Olimpiadi, Mästro delle Olimpiadi, Fustigazione, Bighe, Teschio, Citaredo, Scimmia, Montollo, Colle Casuccini, and Poggio al Moro (Jazwa 2020, p. 32).



Figure 28: Detail of an Etruscan funerary stele (Ducati no. 10, face B), including boxers (Museo Civico Bologna), 390–360 BC.

and uniform conception of the Underworld and of the transition into that realm.” There can be no doubt, however, that boxing kythed bright in the Etruscan *imaginaire* of death and afterlife.

Spectators of a boxing match in a fresco in the Tomba delle Bighe in Tarquinia are shown in a variety of activities, including lovemaking. Grandstands appear to be set up to observe the spectacle. Various (clothed) figures on top are seated and cheering while some figures beneath the grandstand are naked and include one couple in an amorous act.<sup>54</sup> Boxers from a fresco in the Tomba delle Bighe, which is badly damaged, are reconstructed in Figure 29. Two young men watch another boxing match in the same fresco (Figure 30). Evidently ready to participate in a match themselves, one appears to give advice to the boy who will be his adversary in a few short moments.

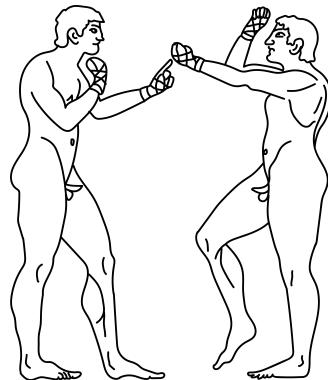


Figure 29: Reconstructed detail of two boxers having it out from Tomba delle Bighe di Tarquinia, ca. 490 BC.

On the right wall of the Tomba del letto Funebre, in Tarquinia, a man appears to interact

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<sup>54</sup>The grandstands occupy a corner of the tomb, and are depicted on two adjacent walls. Boxers flank the grandstands on one side, pankratiasts on the other.

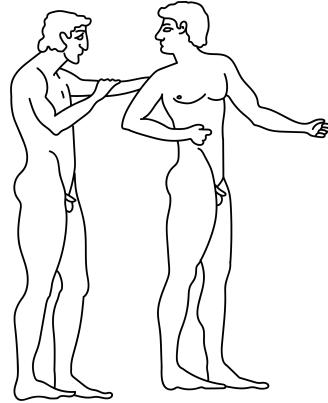


Figure 30: Reconstructed detail from Tomba delle Bighe di Tarquinia, ca. 490 BC. Two young men prepare for a match as they watch two older men slugging it out just to their right.

with a defeated boxer who holds a sponge to his head (Thuillier 1985, p. 128) in order to absorb a profusion of blood, which drips to the ground (Figure 31). The victor stands to the right, facing the other direction, and throws yet more punches in triumph at the air; a *suplu* stands between the loser and the winner. In the Tomba della Scimmia (Figure 32), the fighters are flanked on the right by an athlete preparing to throw a javelin and a diminutive male<sup>55</sup> holding a palm branch and an aryballos full of oil, perhaps to smear on the fighters.

The boxers painted in the Tomba dell'Iscrizioni (Figure 33) are separated by a curious object shaped like an I-beam (Thuillier 1985, p. 207). One possible antecedent for this object may be the pillar that appears between boxers in Cypriot and Ugaritic cylinder seals (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b;c). This may be the aniconic representation of a divinity. In Greek and Alpine depictions, this position is typically reserved for a prize, but in the cylinder seals, it is often a more abstract element—arguably representing a numinous being presiding over the match. The prize that stands between the fighters in the Tomba della Scimmia is also unexpected. A low stand (below the fighters' knees) holds a richly-decorated piece of fabric that may conceal another object (Thuillier 1985, p. 132).

The names<sup>56</sup> that appear near the Iscrizioni boxers are of particular interest in distinguishing Etruscan from Hellenic boxing. Thuillier (2017) argues that because the boxers (here as well as in the Tomba degli Auguri) receive a single name instead of two (a *prænomen* plus a *gentilic*), the fighters necessarily “stand outside the class of gentlefolk” (p. 224). He goes farther, claiming that “[T]hese were real sports stars, and the deceased (or his family) wanted these individuals ... to accompany him in image to the beyond” (p. 225). In cases where two names appear next to fighters, as in the Tomba Cardarelli, the author reasons that these must have been the names of fighters’ *domini*, i.e., their owners. He acknowledges that

<sup>55</sup>Thuillier (1985, p. 132) identifies the small figure as a slave.

<sup>56</sup>Transliterating the characters left to right, the fighter on the left-hand side of the fresco appears to be named Vecenes Mei (likely the names of the boxer by his father and by his mother) and his adversary is named Fivan (Gray 1840, p. 185).



Figure 31: Detail from Tomba del Letto Funebre, right wall, ca. 460 BC. The figure on the right is a nude boxer who holds a sponge up to his face, which drips blood. The figure to the left, perhaps a servant, looks at the boxer over his shoulder.



Figure 32: Detail from Tomba della Scimmia, 480–470 BC.

they may have fought “during the funeral games” (*ibid.*). Thus, Thuillier alludes to the possibility that boxers, owned by their masters, were forced to fight in Etruria, and that they did so in conjunction with funeral games. This has little to do with the traditions of Greek *pygmacchia*.

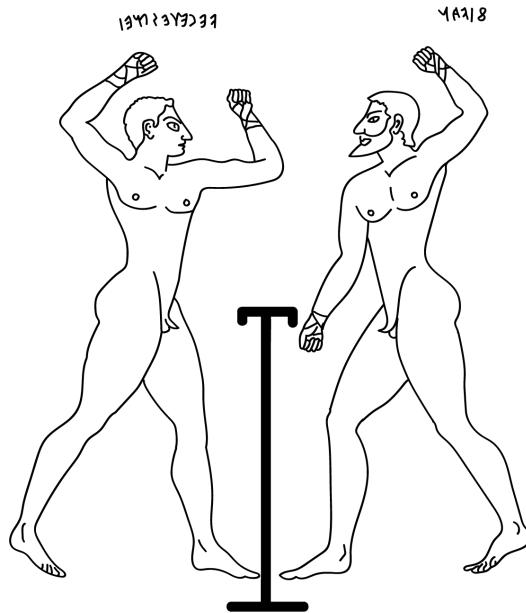


Figure 33: Drawing of the now-damaged boxers in the Tomba dell’Iscrizioni, 520 BC. The words above the fighters, most likely their proper names (read right to left), may be transliterated as *Vecenes Mei* (L) and *Fivan* (R).

Boxers painted in Etruscan tombs are generally naked, with the possible exception of the fighters depicted in the Tomba dell’Iscrizioni. Thuillier (1985, p. 122–123) describes the fighters as wearing a loincloth that, while covering their genitals, leaves their buttocks exposed. In the Tomba degli Auguri, the boxer on the right is infibulated (Thuillier 1985, p. 123–124). The boxer on the left in the Tomba della Scimmia (Figure 32) is similarly protected. Here, a cord around the waist provides an anchor for the suspending cord tied to the boxer’s foreskin (Thuillier 1985, pp. 378–379).

A naked man (Figure 34) identified as a boxer stands to the left of the entrance door in the Tomba della Fustigazione (Thuillier 1985, p. 129). A similar, though comically ventripotent, boxer is found painted in the same position in the Tomba Cardarelli (Thuillier 1985, pp. 128, 557–558). The boxers that surround doors in Etruscan tombs were perhaps intended to “threaten any unwanted visitors” (Thuillier 2017, p. 226).

While boxers are often paired in Etruscan depictions, this is not always the case: a single boxer appears in the Tomba del Colle Casuccini (Thuillier 1985, p. 133). In this fresco, the figure assumes the characteristic posture often associated with boxers in Etruscan art (Jazwa 2020, p. 30). His front foot is raised with toe pointed down while he balances on the ball

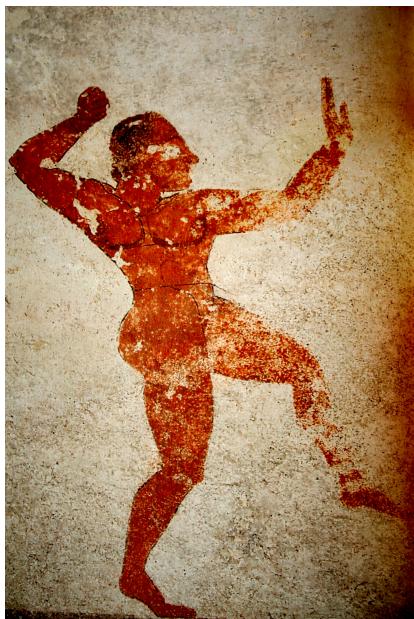


Figure 34: Detail from Tomba della Fustigazione, entrance wall, left of the door, ca. 490 BC.

of his back foot. His front arm is also raised with an open hand and his back hand is raised, elbow bent, with his fist cocked back to his ear. The Colle Casuccini boxer is accompanied by a *suplu*, to his left. A stick-wielding official oversees a wrestling match to the right. It is possible, as argued by Jannot (1985, p. 74), that isolated boxers in Etruscan tomb paintings had a “symbolic or magical role” (translation ours).

The Corsini chair (Galleria Corsini, No. 666) is most likely a first-century Roman copy of a fifth-century Etruscan throne, one with decoration that incorporates elements of East Alpine situla art (Bonfante 1977). Two boxers, wearing short chitons, appear on the throne (Figure 35). The prize, which floats between the boxers, is a Roman helmet, perhaps modified from the Etruscan original. Most remarkably, the boxers carry some version of the *hanteln*.<sup>57</sup> Lucke and Frey (1962, p. 47) argue that the habits and customs (*Sitten und Gebräuche*) of the Eastern Alps did not necessarily end with their own material culture and may have been adopted by the Etruscans, as evidenced in the chair’s decoration. Bonfante (1977, pp. 115–116) finds in the Corsini chair “proof” of “direct descent” from “northern models.” Lucke and Frey (1962, p. 28) dismiss claims that the *hanteln* depicted on the throne are an Etruscan innovation. The original chair, they argue, was decorated in the late fourth century, too late to have influenced toreutic art of the Alps. Frelih (1989, p. 114, fn. 46) points out that the theme of martial revue (*borilni revkvizit*) also connects the Corsini chair to toreutic art.

Described as a boy’s boxing match (*Knaberingkampf*) by Matz and von Duhn (1881, vol. 2, p. 2), the scene on the lid of a “Greek” marble sarcophagus held at the Villa Carpegna in Rome

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<sup>57</sup>The curved form of the dumbbells has been cited to argue that they are Greek jumping weights. That this curvature was intended by the artist has been challenged, however (Thuillier 1985, p. 264).



Figure 35: Detail from the marble Corsini Throne (Galleria Corsini, No. 666), evidently a first-century Roman replica of a fifth-century Etruscan original. The boxers wear short chitons and hold the dumbbells known to situla art (Section 2).

depicts fighters holding dumbbells in gloves that resemble oven mitts (Figure 36). The rest of the scene (not pictured) includes pairs of cherubic figures (probably Erotes) wrestling and boxing, accompanied by a double-flute player, connecting the scene to Etruscan iconography (*ibid.*). On the sarcophagus lid, a similarly youthful official bears a palm branch that he seems to swing at the standing boxer, presumably for committing the *supercherie* of stepping on his fallen opponent's leg. On the other side of the sarcophagus, a woman is depicted with a "broad braid" hairstyle characteristic of the late third and fourth centuries. Etruscan ash caskets (*aschenkisten*, small sarcophagus-like repositories for cremated human remains) are included in the image, as well. The object is most likely Etruscan.

Boxing Erotes appear on funeral objects going back as far as the fifth century BC in Greece (Scanlon 2002, p. 317).<sup>58</sup> "The metaphor comparing Eros, the human phenomenon of desire, with the tension, the struggle, and the agonistic spirit of the contest is thus married explicitly on the Roman sarcophagi with the theme of death, risk, and hazard present in the life of any person who acts on his or her desires" (Scanlon 2002, p. 317).

The sarcophagus lid from the Villa Carpegna (Figure 36) has been cited to argue that kicking was allowed in some forms of boxing (Jüthner and Mehl 1962). It appears to show the victorious fighter stepping with his right foot on the right leg of his fallen opponent. We agree with Crowther (1990, p. 177), who points out that "this does not necessarily represent the kick which led to the fall."

Numerous objects depicting boxing were made in Greece and exported to Etruria. Others were produced in Italy, perhaps by Greek artisans. Both types of artifact arguably reflect Etruscan tastes and interests. One intriguing example is a kylix made at Chiusi, featuring a minotaur (Figure 37). The beast appears to have large boxing gloves on his hands. These are

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<sup>58</sup>The tradition continued into the second and third century AD (Newby 2005, p. 41). Boxing was not an uncommon theme in the decoration of children's sarcophagi, well into the second century AD (e.g., Museo Gregorio Profano, No. 1019).



Figure 36: Detail of a sarcophagus lid housed at the Villa Carpegnà, Rome (no inventory number). The boxers hold dumbbells in their gloves. Probably Etruscan, based on surrounding iconography, and dated to ca. 400 BC.

presumably the *himantes*, since the one on his right hand is unraveling. This object makes for an interesting comparison with a Levantine cylinder seal depicting boanthropic boxers (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b) and reminds us of the long history of boxing's association with bulls, including among the Minoans (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c). The image could be related to Theseus, slayer of the minotaur and legendary originator of boxing by some Greek accounts (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d).

Another vessel, a red-figure cup attributed to the Villa Giulia Painter (Figure 38), suggests that the Etruscans had an interest in the disfigurement of boxers, like the Greeks. The boxer on the left is noteworthy for the appearance of a facial injury—a large hematoma under the eye called a ‘mouse’.

Two vases from Italy, one evidently of Attic origin, suggests that the boxers might be kept within bounds through apparatus (Poliakoff 1987a, Figs. 81 and 82). Both objects are now held in museums in Italy.<sup>59</sup> It seems premature to conclude from this evidence that the notion of a boxing ring was first developed in Italy, only to be modeled by Greek artisans on vases that they designed to suit Etruscan tastes. Nevertheless, depictions of boundaries

<sup>59</sup>Poliakoff (1987b) argues that the story of Melancomas (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023) is fictional on the grounds that Greeks enforced proximity with a barrier to promote striking. He cites Hesychius (fl. c. 500 AD) that the Greeks used a “ladder” κλίμαξ and boxers fought “from the ladder” ἐκ κλίμακος, some sort of wooden device in which the boxers would presumably stand (Poliakoff 1987b). Furthermore, he cites Eustathius (c. 1115–c. 1195/6 AD) for a late corroboration. We acknowledge the existence of apparatus to restrain boxers to mutual proximity (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d), but do not consider this expedient to be universal or perhaps even widespread in classical and Hellenistic boxing. While certainly not dispositive evidence against Melancomas, it does highlight a practice of enforced proximity in training if perhaps not in competition.

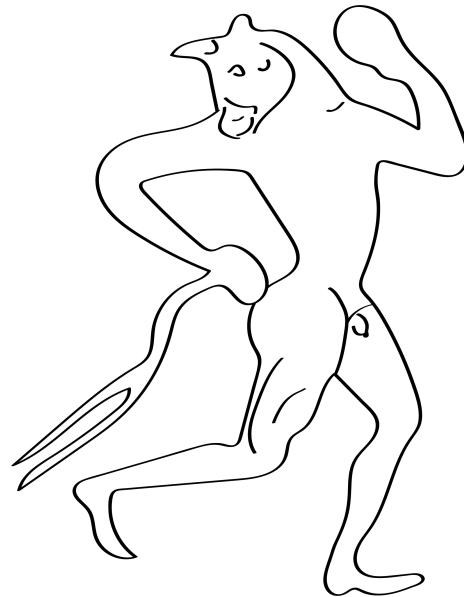


Figure 37: Detail of a black-figure kylix from Chiusi (Boston Museum of Fine Arts, No. 76.235). The figure appears to be a minotaur wearing Greek-style boxing gloves, one of which is unraveling. The vase is dated 525 to 475 BC.



Figure 38: Red-figure cup, attributed to the Villa Giulia Painter. The vessel was discovered at Tarquinia and is dated 460–450 BC. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, No. F-2522.

are so uncommon in the iconography of ancient boxing that this should be entertained as a possibility.<sup>60</sup>

There is some evidence that the Etruscans liked boxing dirty (Thomas 1997), and included digging into the eye with the thumb among their tricks. Presumably with this purpose in mind, the fighters' thumbs are extended on a Eubœan amphora now housed in the Museo Gregoriano Etrusco (No. MV.34976.o.o).<sup>61</sup>

The Ficoroni cista (Figures 39, 40) is another Greek-influenced object found in Etruria. The cista is handsomely engraved with a synoptic portrayal of Polydeuces' boxing match with Amycus. The engraving of the himantes demonstrates *ad unguem* the artist's close attention to their layering and structure. Partially occluded by the ropes that bind him to a tree, they are also visible on Amycus. It is easy to imagine that members of the Etruscan elite, who appear to have had considerable reverence for the Dioscuri, found the story of the Amycian boxing match as compelling as these images (Thuillier 1985, p. 488–489).

Despite evidence of Greek-influenced boxing artifacts in Etruria, Thuillier (2021) argues that Etruscan sport was by no means merely derivative of Greek athletics.<sup>62</sup> In Etruria, for instance, blood was spilled during boxing matches to benefit the recently deceased. Thuillier (2017, p. 230) notes as early as the seventh century BC, several tombs at Tarquinia<sup>63</sup> were designed with a wide entrance, "resembling a small public square, often ringed on several sides with benches to accommodate spectators." Gathered to send their deceased relative to the next world, an elite Etruscan clan would there be able to "watch dance performances as well as boxing or wrestling matches, within the context of funerary games" (*ibid.*). The author notes that, "Other religious ceremonies, such as sacrifices, could of course be performed there as well" (*ibid.*).<sup>64</sup> Human sacrifice was a part of Etruscan culture and it also typified their northern neighbors, including the Celts and the paleo-Venetians (Bonfante 1984; 2011).

Brandt (2015) cites the late Roman author Arnobius,<sup>65</sup> who mentions the Etruscan funerary cult described in the lost *Acherontic Books*.<sup>66</sup> From Arnobius' statement, Brandt surmises that among the Etruscans it was understood that "a blood sacrifice was able to give immortality to dead souls" (p. 125) and Krauskopf (2006, p. 66) goes even farther, arguing that "the Etruscans believed that certain...sacrifices...could transform human souls into gods."<sup>67</sup> Jannot (1998, p. 67) suggested that the blood shed in boxing matches might have been intended to furnish the deceased with longer life in the great beyond. Brandt notes that while

<sup>60</sup> References to a delimited space for a boxing match are challenging to descry in epic poetry. The best (though admittedly controversial) example is rather late: the *cavea* mentioned in the Valerian *Argonautica* (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023); see also the 'confined space' *χώρος στενός* of Theocritus' *Idylls* (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023).

<sup>61</sup> The item is shown in Poliakoff (1987a, Fig. 90).

<sup>62</sup> The view is not universally shared. Lucke and Frey (1962, p. 29), for example, argue that the Tuscan 'ring' was strongly influenced by the Greek model. Jazwa (2020, p. 35) finds sufficient heuristic evidence to conclude, "The presence of boxing in Etruria need not be explained by Greek or other external influences...[A]n independent invention in Etruria is most likely."

<sup>63</sup> These tombs include the tumuli of Doganaccia, Poggio del Forno, Poggio Gallinaro, and Infernaccio.

<sup>64</sup> As Jazwa (2020, p. 31) has noted, comments by Livy (1.35, 5.1) suggest that Etruscan boxers participated in Roman athletic events, so their association with the Etruscan funerary cultus was by no means exclusive.

<sup>65</sup> Arnobius was a Christian apologist who wrote in the fourth century AD. He comments (dismissively) on blood sacrifice among the Etruscans in *Adversus nationes* 2.62.

<sup>66</sup> Krauskopf (2006, p. 66) notes that we have only the barest evidence for what was contained in these books, known in Latin as *Libri Acheruntici*.

<sup>67</sup> The resulting gods were known (in Latin) as *dii animales* and were related to the Roman household / ancestral gods called the *Penates*.



Figure 39: Detail of the Ficoroni cista (ca. AD 340) showing the preparations of Polydeuces (at left, striking the κώρυκος barefisted) for his boxing match with Amycus. Silenus sits at the fountain (Museum of Villa Giulia, No. 24787).

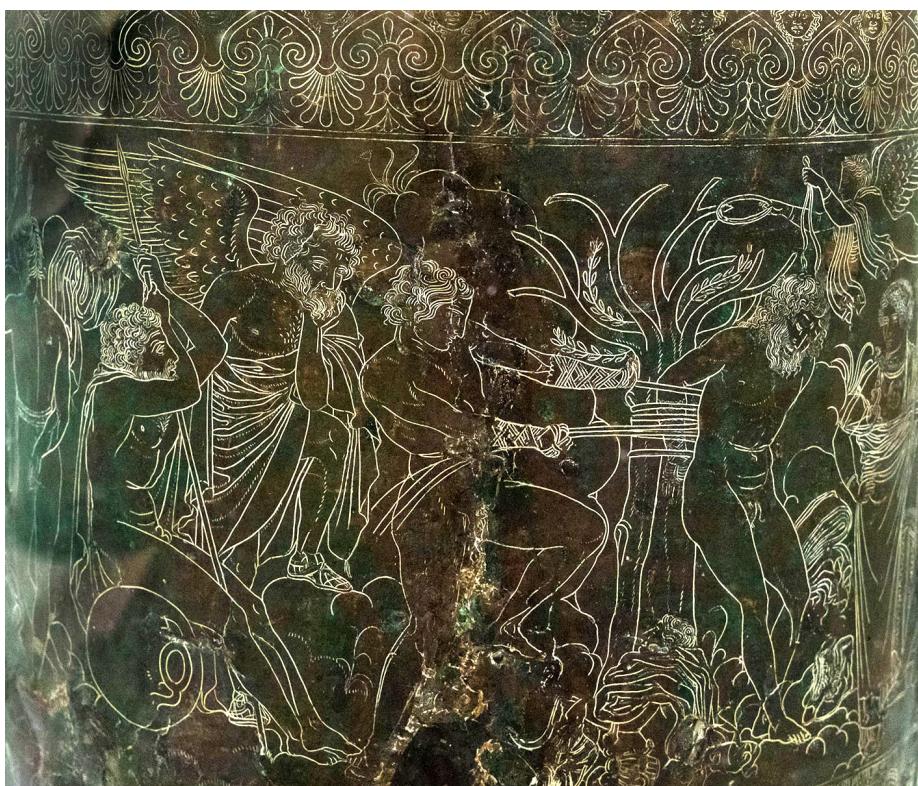


Figure 40: Detail of the Ficoroni cista (ca. AD 340) showing the aftermath of Polydeuces' boxing match with Amycus, whom he ties to a tree. (Museum of Villa Giulia, No. 24787).

animal blood sacrifice is not depicted in Etruscan tomb paintings, “scenes with the flowing of human blood are not infrequent,” including scenes of boxers (p. 127). The author muses, “Could such blood-thirsty scenes have served the same purpose as the animal sacrifices, to give immortality to the deceased’s soul? At death the blood stops running; flowing blood in a ritual context would thus be a symbol of life” (*ibid.*). Brandt perceives in the “cognitive world” of the Etruscans (and later the Romans) “a tension between death and the life-giving blood, procured through fighting” (*ibid.*).

## 4 Lucania (Pæstum)

Around 600 BC, Greek settlers established a southern Italian colony they called Poseidonia; later, the Romans called it Pæstum. Perhaps one hundred years after its founding, an Italic, Oscan-speaking group known as the Lucanians conquered the city. Rather than drive out the Greeks, the Lucanians seem to have mixed relatively easily with them and forged a thriving culture. The Italiote art that resulted from this concrescence is known to us from vase paintings and from a relatively large number of painted tumuli, where stone slabs formed the four walls and pitched ceiling. These slabs were richly decorated with frescoes. The tombs were the resting places of the Lucanian elite, and the art adorning the slabs is arguably a pastiche of Italic and Greek elements. Given the strong possibility that the Lucanians were influenced culturally by the Etruscans, living farther to the north on the Appenine peninsula, many scholars seem to regard the Lucanian tombs as ‘Etruscan’. Indeed, both groups decorated their tombs with images of boxers. At the risk of being too precise, we differentiate Lucanian representations of boxing from Etruscan ones (Section 3), though it is entirely possible that both belong to the same supercategory.

About 55% of the Lucanian tomb frescoes include representations of boxing (Pontrandolfo Greco and Rouveret 1992, p. 68). Armed gladiatorial duels are even more common (over 90% of tombs include such depictions). Pugilistic scenes are frequently juxtaposed on the same slab with gladiatorial contests. The corpus of Lucanian tomb paintings is rather large and relatively understudied. We list all of the images of boxing we have been able to identify (see Table 1).

The Lucanian depictions of boxing differ considerably from the Etruscan variety. However, the emphasis on blood flow and the association with funerary ritual is common to both. Another similarity is the presence of an aolist in the Lucanian boxing matches.<sup>68</sup> We interpret this to mean that associations between boxing, blood, music, and human sacrifice were strongly linked in Archaic and post-Archaic Italy, with roots reaching back to the Iron Age in the north (see Chapter 2), if not even further to the ancient Near East (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b). The Lucanian approach to boxing stands in contrast to the more eastern (i.e., Hellenic) focus on athleticism and individual glory to be won in boxing. It seems to hearken back to the even more ancient cultic boxing practiced in Bronze Age Anatolia and Mesopotamia.

Painted tombs at Pæstum feature boxers who are more often than not bloodied in combat. There are at least twenty-two pugilistic scenes form this corpus. The major features of each scene are catalogued in Table 1.

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<sup>68</sup> Thuillier (1985) notes that this is *favorable à l'influence étrusque* (p. 225).

Table 1: Lucanian tomb paintings (location, tomb number, slab) that include scenes of pugilism (N = north, etc.). The matrix indicates whether or not particular features are present or absent (X-arms = crossed arms). The question mark is used when the best available image does not permit determination (usually due to fresco deterioration). Locations: An = Andriuolo; La = Laghetto; Ar = Arcioni; PA = Porta Aurea; Li = Licinella; G = Gaudio; V = Vannullo; SF = Sequestro Finanza; T = Tufts.

The fighters in all but one case are entirely naked (the exception is a fresco now found in the collection at Tufts University; the boxer in question wears a decorated loincloth). Blood is evident in most of the frescoes (17/22) and flows prodigiously in many of these. An aolist is present in most examples (15/22). Typically, the fists are tightly wound, claviform, in strips of cloth or leather (14/22).

Blood was not unknown in Greek depictions of boxing (Figure 41), but blood seems to have played a special role in Italic pugilism. Thuillier (2017, p. 222) notes that the boxing scenes at Paestum bear “a pronounced Etruscan stamp.”



Figure 41: Boxers on a Nikosthenic amphora (British Museum #1867,0508.968) found at Agrigento, Sicily and dated 550–540 BC. The bleeding pugilist is represented widely in Italic art, including the funerary frescoes discovered at Paestum, in southern Italy.

In general, the action in the Lucanian boxing frescoes appears to be of a serious nature. However, the burlesque is evident in up to one-third of the compositions. This is clearly signaled by the presence of a fodgel, satyr-like aolist (4/22). It may also be expressed by deformed boxers (3/22; including one with no genitalia) and the single example of an ithyphallic fighter. Here, we may see a connection to Etruscan depictions of boxers, where big-bellied fighters depicted in some tombs (e.g., the Tomba Cardarelli and the Tomba della Fustigazione) were perhaps deliberately juxtaposed with the skilled athletes painted in others (Thuillier 1985, pp. 129, 557–558).

The Lucanian boxers were occasionally distinguished from one another by skin tone (6/22). In Andriuolo 24, for example, a black pugilist has received a damaging blow to the face; one critic has argued that the portly figure in this fresco is a pygmy (Zuchtriegel 2020, p. 395). The dark-skinned boxers do not in all cases bear other features suggestive of African origin (cf. Vannullo, Tomb 4 in Figure 44). For this reason, it has been argued that the skin tone is not intended to be realistic, but merely to distinguish the fighters from one another. However, we note that there are no black gladiators in any of the Lucanian tomb frescoes. It is possible that Lucanian boxing was reserved for low-status individuals, perhaps slaves.

Vegetal motifs are common in the Lucanian tomb frescoes. While by no means exclusive to the scenes of boxing, balauistas are frequently found floating around the pugilists (Ferrari et al. 2018, p. 826). Pomegranates are likely symbolic of death and rebirth, appropriate for the funerary setting. Indeed, this may give us some clues as to why boxing of this particularly sanguinary type is included so frequently in the tomb frescoes.

The depiction of boxers in Tomb 3 of Laghetto (Figure 43) may include the earliest known representation of the kind of weaponized *cestus* that became commonplace in Late Antiquity (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023). While the precise form of the weaponized *cestus*, which appears on the left (lead) hand of each boxer, is not altogether clear in the fresco as it remains, we can say for sure that the left and right hands of the boxers are outfitted differently. On the right hand we see the tightly wrapped, club-like gauntlet (apparent on both hands in most boxers of the Paestum tomb paintings). The left hand, which holds particular interest for us, is equipped with a different material, rendered by the artist with tighter cross-hatching than we see on the boxers' right hands. This material covers the knuckles and the back of the hand up to the wrist. The cross-hatching suggests a thinner strip, designed perhaps to carry pieces of metal referred to in later forms of Roman boxing glove. Extensions from these gloves are most likely the finger and thumb. Why are the fingers free?

To approach this question, let us consider a modern analogy. A relatively recent innovation in western combat sports is the mixed martial arts or MMA glove. In some cases MMA gloves bear a thick pad across the knuckles; in others, the padding is inconsiderable. Striking is permitted while wearing either type.<sup>69</sup> In all gloves of this type, the fingers and thumb are free. In MMA, this allows a fighter to grasp his standing opponent in order to wrestle him to the ground and more easily subdue him using a variety of holds. This form of fighting would be greatly deprecated if opponents wore modern boxing gloves—or the right-handed gloves of the Laghetto Tomb 3 boxers—due to the restraints imposed on the fingers and thumb.

Are the Laghetto boxers practicing something more akin to MMA? The culture that produced this image was doubtless already familiar with Greek *pankration*, the ancient combat sport most similar to MMA, and which was practiced among Greeks as early as the seventh century BC. *Pankration* fighters did not wear gauntlets of any kind and depictions of the sport typically show the fighters struggling on the ground or, if standing, then kicking. Indeed, it seems to be the presence of gauntlets in ancient depictions of the combat sports that allows us to conclude that boxing and not *pankration* is taking place (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d).

Given the emphasis on bloody combat in the Lucanian tomb paintings, it is likely that the liberated fingers on the left (lead) hands of the Laghetto boxers allowed them to gouge the eyes, mutilate the ears, and “fish-hook” the mouth and nostrils of their adversaries—all banned in modern MMA and rendered more or less impossible with the modern boxing glove (at least since the immobilization of the thumb in the mid-twentieth-century). What we see at Laghetto Tomb 3 is an experiment that may not have lasted, or was perhaps simply replaced by the far more lethal spiked gauntlets often depicted in Roman-style pugilism of Late Antiquity.

Lucanian boxers depicted in Tomb 3 of Vannullo present evidence of claviform, wrapped fists on both hands (Figure 42) much like those often presumed to be worn by the Boxing

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<sup>69</sup>Gloves without the knuckle pad are sometimes called ‘grappling gloves’ while the gloves with the knuckle pad are sometimes called ‘striking gloves’.



Figure 42: Boxers on the south slab of Vannullo Tomb 3. Fists are tightly wrapped, including the forearm. Unlike other Lucanian depictions of boxing, blood is not featured prominently here.



Figure 43: Boxers on the north(?) slab of Laghetto Tomb 3. The boxers appear to wear weaponized *caesti* on their left (lead) hands. Their right (back) hands are wrapped in the club-like fashion observed in other Lucanian tomb frescoes. Blood streams from the face, abdomen, and legs of the boxers.

Boys of Akrotiri (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c). In Vannullo 3, the light-skinned boxer (on the right) naïvely thrusts both hands forward. Both are tightly wound up in bandages or strips, perhaps of leather, like Greek *bimantes*. The left (lead) hand of the dark-skinned boxer is equipped in the same fashion. Unfortunately, it is not possible to make out the details of this boxer's right hand, raised in front of his chest. Similarly indeterminate is the equipage on the right (back) hands of the boxers depicted in Tomb 4 of Vannullo (Figure 44). Though no fingers can be seen, it is possible that the artist wished to depict a closed fist unencumbered by any glove, or perhaps wearing a glove like the one seen on the lead hands of the Laghetto Tomb 3 boxers but curled into a fist (Figure 43). At the very least, we can argue that the Lucanians innovated boxing through differential outfitting of the lead and back hands. At Laghetto we have indication of mobile fingers on the lead hand, while at Vannullo Tomb 4, the lead hand is the blunter instrument and the back hand bears a different type of *cæstus*, if not a fingerless glove.

The Iliadic funeral games notwithstanding, one critic notes: "Bloody combat at funeral games has no direct precedent in Greek sepulchral art" (Corrigan 1979, p. 210). The particularly sanguigenous pugilism depicted in tombs of pre-Roman Italy, including the frescoes at Paestum, suggests the presence of an autochthonous Italic death cult, perhaps connected to or even derived from the bruising battles featured on East Alpine *situlae*, where the dumbbells would have provoked significant bloodshed (Section 2). There is thus strong evidence for a link between funerals, human sacrifice, propitiation of the dead, and boxing in pre-Roman Italy. Given the absence of evidence for a similar pugilistic death cult in post-Homeric Greece, it is possible that Italic associations between boxing and human sacrifice are in fact quite ancient, and stretch back to early Celtic settlement of Italy and Greece, if not to the earlier Indo-European dispersion.<sup>70</sup>

Boxing in Lucania was also represented by more traditional Greek depictions, like the one on a Skyphos described by Connor (1995). A fine example of the red-figure style, the boxer represents the bold graphic style of Greek artisans able to capture the dynamics of fighting and the tension of the male bodies engaged in it. On the other side of the skyphos, a boxer raises both arms at an angle, with the fingers extended. Stylistically, the depiction has little in common with the the Lucanian tomb frescoes, further evidence of the unique cultural exchange that took place here before the ascendancy of Rome.

## 5 Sardinia

Dated to as late as 750 BC, the statues of Mont'e Prama in western Sardinia are the oldest life-size human sculptures of the western Mediterranean (Tronchetti and Pauli 2016, p. 63). Some of these statues allegedly represent boxers (see, for instance, Figure 46).<sup>71</sup> They are accoutred after a fashion that resembles the strange garb we observed in Mycenæan depictions of boxing (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d). Some of the statues identified as boxers wear belts around their upper-chest and one bronze archer wears a gorget reminiscent of the one worn in Mycenæan pottery fragment (Minoja and Usai 2011, p. 37). The fighters carry shields

<sup>70</sup>We suspect that Hittite boxing may have been influenced as much by this hypothetical Indo-European substratum as by Babylonian and Sumerian precedents.

<sup>71</sup>Two torsos perhaps belonging to representations of pugilists—not the torsos pictured here—were discovered as late as May 2022 (Unattributed 2022).



Figure 44: Boxers on the south slab of Vannullo Tomb 4. The boxers have tightly wrapped fists. While not flowing freely as in other Lucanian tomb frescoes, blood is indicated on the face and breast of the dark-skinned fighter; also on the abdomen, left arm, and left thigh of the light-skinned fighter.



Figure 45: Lucanian red-figure skyphos (University of Melbourne, No. MUV75: 1989.0070).  
The object is dated 410–400 BC.

and wear a kind of arm-length *cæstus*. They are often bare-chested.

The upper body of one of the boxers is naked and he wears a pointed loincloth (Tronchetti and Pauli 2016, p. 65). The clothing recalls the loincloth worn by a Minoan boxer figurine found on Crete (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c). The Nuragic boxer holds a shield above his head that was probably originally made of leather (Tronchetti and Pauli 2016, p. 65).

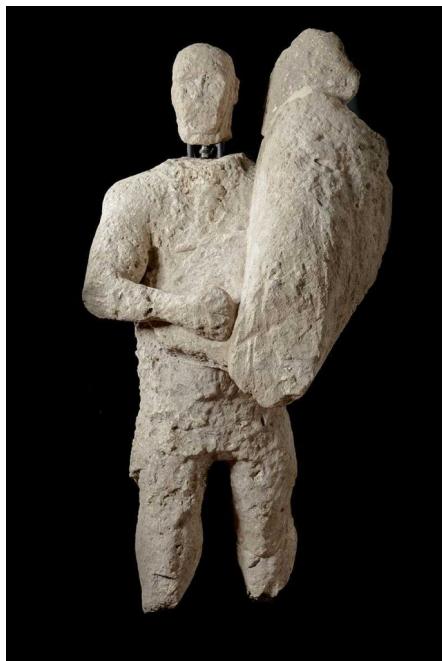


Figure 46: Sandstone nuragic boxer figures from Mont'e Prama (Museo archeologico nazionale—Cagliari, inventory numbers unknown). Dated between 1100–750 BC.

These little-studied monuments were associated with burials along a path—a kind of *via sacra* (Tronchetti and Pauli 2016, p. 64). There are a total of seventeen statues that have been categorized as ‘boxers’ among the ruins of Mont'e Prama (intriguingly, eight other statues represent archers).

It is believed that the Sardinian boxers were created by the Nuragic culture between 1100

and 750 BC. But are these really boxers or is “boxer” just a label that has stuck? The fact that the fighters are routinely depicted with shields makes us wonder if they fit our self-imposed definition of unarmed orthograde combatants (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022a). The term ‘boxer’ has perhaps been applied to these statues by convention as it is generally supposed that the fighters were in fact armed.

The ‘boxers’ make up the most uniform group, showing only minor variations in size. All represent bare-chested males wearing loin-cloths with the rear trimmed to a triangle. In some cases, shallow grooves depict the strings used to tie the loin-cloths. The boxer’s heads are covered by a smooth cap that suggest the use of cloth or leather. A curved oval shield presumably made of leather on a wooden frame covers one of the boxers’ arms from elbow to fist. It is invariably held on the left arm and raised above the men’s head, while a leather sleeve running from the elbow down protected their right arm (Tronchetti and van Dommelen 2005, p. 190).

While separated by a yawning gap of time, it is worth considering what influence the fighting culture of Archaic Sardinia may have had on developments on the Appenine Peninsula, including among the Etruscans (Section 3), Lucanians (Section 4), and the Romans themselves (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023). The fighting style represented by the Nuragic statues corresponds most readily to gladiatorial combat, though it seems that too little is known about the culture that created these statues to even suggest how their version of ‘pugilism’ might have influenced recreational bloodletting elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean.

## 6 Conclusion

Many of the depictions we have reviewed in this article force us to wonder, once more, what makes boxing boxing? The Lucanian tomb painting at Laghetto (Figure 43) presents us with the problem *in nuce*: The upright posture of the fighters and their gloved hands are almost certainly suggestive of ancient boxing (rather than *pankration*). However, the inclusion on the hands of sharp elements problematizes boxing as an ‘unarmed’ combat. As we will see in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023), boxing gloves were ostentatiously weaponized by the Romans in Late Antiquity, yet boxing remained distinct from gladiatorial combat. As we have demonstrated here, the ontological boundary between the reinforced and weaponized fist began long before the Roman ascendancy. Furthermore, the ritual focus on funeral games is both of long vintage and yet a departure from nearby Greek athleticism. The unique features of these European boxing cultures show the semipiternal genesis of boxers playing with the rules and generating new forms: either ancient forms independently rediscovered or obscurely transmitted, or novel forms that tested the limits of what orthograde personal combat could become.

Although traditionally treated as a minor sidelight in the history of boxing, the blood-thirsty nature of East Alpine, Italic, and Sardinian boxing together produced a fertile terroire for Roman gladiatorial boxing soon upon the import of Hellenistic boxing practices. Without these unique, pre-Roman forms of boxing, combat sport in the Roman world may never have achieved its gory apotheosis.

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