TOTAL COMBAT: From the Bronze Age to the Modern Cage

1. Before Greek Pankration: The Proto-MMA of the Ancient World

In the scorching plains of Mesopotamia, long before the Greeks dreamed of Olympia, people were already striking, grabbing, throwing, going to the ground, and finishing the job there. It all begins around 2900 BCE with a small cylinder seal found at Khafaje: two naked men face each other, perfectly symmetrical. One holds the wrist of the other while his right fist is already on its way to the opponent's face. Behind them, a third figure raises his arms, as if to excite the audience. No weapons, no tied prisoners: just two men testing each other fairly. This is the oldest indisputable image of a punch combined with a grab.

Three centuries later, on another seal from the Urukesh period (Louvre), the scene becomes more dynamic: a naked wrestler pivots his hip to throw his opponent, while the other attempts a desperate last elbow strike. The victor, arms raised, sometimes holds the severed head of his opponent, signaling that the scene is moving toward myth, yet the technique remains realistic and already mastered.

Around 2100 BCE, the Sumerian tablet of Gilgamesh and Agga provides the first written testimony. The text is brief, almost mundane: "The young men of Uruk played in the plain. They seized each other, struck with fists, and threw one another down." The verbs *sud-sud* ("to strike") and *dib-dib* ("to seize and throw down") repeat like a refrain. Leading 20th-century Assyriologists, from Kramer to Jacobsen, see here a clear description of a wrestling game where punches are allowed—in other words, the very definition of mixed combat.

But it is in the first millennium BCE, under the Neo-Assyrian Empire, that the image becomes almost brutally clear. On the walls of the palaces of Nimrud, Khorsabad, and Nineveh, sculptors engraved military training scenes with surgical precision. Under the gaze of a bearded officer armed with a staff, two soldiers in loincloths face off: one drives a knee into the belly, the other attempts a backward throw; further along, a fist strikes the face, followed by an over-the-shoulder projection; elsewhere, a man is already on the ground while the other rides him and brings down his elbow—a perfect ground-and-pound. The accompanying inscription is unambiguous: "The young men practice wrestling and strikes (*ina epiri u mahāṣi*) to become strong." In room XXXIII of Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh, a slab even shows a fighter in closed guard on the ground, his opponent above him raising a fist. It is one of the very first depictions of ground combat with strikes in history.

No gloves or wraps are seen: the combat is bare-handed. Fighters are naked or nearly so, without uniforms, showing that the practice extended beyond strictly military contexts. Officers always supervise, so this is mandatory training. Occasionally, King Ashurbanipal watches prisoners forced to fight the same way: the mixture of sport and cruelty is never far.

The Akkadian vocabulary is rich and precise: *ṣibtu* for grabbing, *mahāṣu* for striking (fist, elbow, knee), *napālu* for throwing, *epiru* for hand-to-hand combat in general. When scribes wrote "*ṣibtu u mahāṣu*," they described exactly what we today call mixed combat.

There were no stadiums, no olive wreaths, no hymns to Zeus—but the idea was already there: strike, grab, throw, go to the ground, and finish the job. The concept of "standing + ground + strikes" already existed 1,500 to 2,000 years before the Greeks named it *pankration*.

An Assyrian soldier from the 9th century BCE, teleported into the UFC 1 cage in 1993, would not have been disoriented for more than a few seconds. He would have found Royce Gracie a bit slight, and smiled recognizing, on the walls of his own palace, half the techniques he practiced every morning under his sergeant's eye.

In the Indus Valley civilization, at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, terracotta figurines already show the same logic. One arm strikes, the other seizes; twists, throws, intermediate positions: everything contributes to a complete confrontation, non-ritualized but technically rich. Cylinder seals found at Mari or Susa repeat the same silhouettes: torsos leaned, legs apart, hands grasping whatever they can. Humanity invents the same thing everywhere, independently—a kind of intuitive proto-MMA.

In Egypt, around 2000 BCE, violence becomes almost pedagogical. In the tombs of Beni Hassan, a fifty-meter-long corridor displays over four hundred combat scenes. One sees a jab followed by a double-leg as clean as an Olympic takedown, a perfectly executed armbar from closed guard, a knee-on-belly followed by a ground strike, or a defensive sprawl worthy of any modern coach. In the 19th century, Egyptologists Percy Newberry and John Gardner Wilkinson, perplexed, initially thought these were ritual dances. They later realized it was a military combat manual, training for archers, shield-bearers, and scouts. The names of techniques have vanished, but the Greeks, later, would name this philosophy *pankration*, “the power of all.”

In China, at the same time, the Shang dynasties armed their soldiers with horned helmets and made them fight in improvised earthen arenas. The proto-martial art that emerged would, centuries later, give rise to *Jiao Li*, ancestor of *shuai jiao*, where victory comes through throws, locks, or brutal ground control. Everywhere, the concept is the same: universal and indestructible.

In the Indian subcontinent, early mentions of *malla-yuddha* and Vedic traditions describe fights mixing punches, kicks, grabs, throws, and chokes. Centuries later, *vajramushti*, practiced by warriors, combines strikes, locks, and wrestling in a system very close to ancient *pankration*: a complete approach to dominate an opponent by all available physical means.

In Africa, Nubian frescoes and certain Saharan traditions also attest to fights combining strikes and grappling, sometimes with throws and joint locks. Even on continents without writing, forms of total combat appear spontaneously, proving that the logic of *pankration* is universal and that the idea of combining striking and grappling is millennia old.

2. Greek Pankration – 648 BCE and the Golden Age of Total Combat

At Olympia, during the 33rd Olympiad, *pankration* appears as a codified discipline with absolute freedom. The rules are simple: only biting and eye gouging are forbidden. Everything else—punches, kicks, throws, locks, and chokes—is allowed. The combination of striking and grappling, standing or on the ground, makes this event the most prestigious and feared of the Olympic Games.

Frescoes and accounts depict fights where techniques flow seamlessly, mixing jabs and uppercuts, grabs and throws, ground control, and submissions. The entire body is mobilized, and victory goes to the one who masters all aspects of the confrontation. *Pankration* is the first codified sport to embody total combat: strike, seize, and finish on the ground.

The myth of Arrhichion of Phigalia perfectly illustrates this philosophy. A reigning champion, he dies during a match with a broken ankle but manages to choke his opponent with his legs. The referee raises his arm to declare him the posthumous victor. This episode reveals two things: the brutality of *pankration* and the importance of technique and courage to triumph, even in extreme pain.

At the same time, other peoples practiced hybrid combat: the Gauls fought naked in nature, primitive Romans observed duels mixing strikes and grappling, but only Greek *pankration* codified the idea of a total sport—a martial art where striking and grappling coexist harmoniously, becoming an aesthetic and strategic ideal.

3. From Post-Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Total Combat That Never Dies
After the official disappearance of *pankration*, some disciplines continued to mix strikes and grappling, preserving the spirit of total combat. In Provence, *brancace* or *brancaille* was practiced at fairs and festivals. Fighters struck, grabbed, threw, and tried to immobilize opponents. Only two limits were observed: no weapons and no eye strikes. *Brancaille* is a rural survival of Greek *pankration*, where efficiency prevails over aesthetics, and technique remains central.

In Africa, late Nubian and Egyptian combat preserves the mixture of strikes, throws, and locks. In some Saharan traditions, wrestling already includes strikes and ground control, proving that the concept of total combat is universal and transmitted independently of direct cultural contact.

In India, *malla-yuddha* and *vajramushti* perpetuate the logic of *pankration*: punches and kicks, grabs, throws, chokes, and immobilizations. This complete system serves both warrior training and ritual competitions, maintaining the fundamental principle of total combat.

In China, ancient *shuai jiao* combines wrestling and strikes to unbalance the opponent before throwing. These techniques foreshadow a primitive Asian MMA, faithful to the ancient principle of the body as a total weapon.

In the Ottoman Empire, Janissaries trained in complete combat, mixing strikes, throws, and locks. Across time and space, the idea remains: victory belongs to the one who masters both striking and grappling, standing or on the ground. Ancient *pankration* never disappeared; it simply adapted to cultures and eras, changing name and context while remaining true to its fundamental principle.

4. The Modern Renaissance: Total Combat Returns (19th–20th Century)
At the end of the 19th century, Europe rediscovered Antiquity and, with it, the concept of total combat. Parisian circuses, between feats of strength and exhibition fights, offered audiences the thrill of confrontations where everything was allowed. Wrestlers and boxers faced each other in crossover matches: English boxing against Greco-Roman wrestling, strikes and throws following one another in brutal improvisation. The crowd roared, electrified by this mixture of technique and real violence, and the word “pankration” reappeared in newspapers, as if the echoes of Olympia had come back to life.

In Paris, Joseph Charlemont experimented with “total French boxing”: feet and fists combined with close-combat techniques, an attempt to reinvent total combat for the modern era. Around the same time, Paul Pons, a wrestling champion, faced boxer Charles Le Boucher in spectacular fights lasting dozens of minutes, mixing strikes, grabs, and ground immobilizations. The public discovered that the art of ancient *pankration* could be revived outside stadiums and frescoes, in the contemporary arena, with the same intensity.

Meanwhile, in Japan, Mitsuyo Maeda, a judo master, traveled to Brazil and taught ground control and grappling techniques from traditional judo. In Brazil, these techniques were adapted to local free-fighting practices, already known as *vale-tudo*, popular confrontations mixing boxing, wrestling, and various techniques influenced by European and Japanese traditions. Carlos Gracie, father of the Gracie family, studied, perfected, and systematized these techniques into what became Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, a complete approach where control, immobilizations, and chokes became central. This was not the invention of *vale-tudo*, but the birth of a style that would excel in these free fights, later popularized by the famous “Gracie Challenge.”

In the 1980s, Satoru Sayama, a former Japanese pro wrestler, founded Shooto, the first modern codified system of total combat: strikes, wrestling, and ground work integrated into rules protecting fighters while preserving the logic of *pankration*. Shooto paved the way for televised fights, a global audience, and the professionalization of MMA. From Paris to Rio to Tokyo, total combat regained its vitality. The millennia-old idea—strike, grab, throw, control on the ground—was realized with rules adapted to modern spectators, while

remaining faithful to the spirit of Greek *pankration*. It was no longer just military training or rural sport: it was a global discipline, a renaissance reconnecting Antiquity to the 21st century.

5. November 8, 1993: The Night Pankration Reborn in the Cage

On November 8, 1993, Denver's McNichols Sports Arena was about to host an unprecedented event. UFC 1 was announced as a no-rules tournament to determine the world's best martial art. Eight fighters, from diverse backgrounds—judo, boxing, wrestling, kickboxing—competed with a single goal: survive and win. No regulatory gloves, no weight classes, no rounds. The only rule: victory goes to the one who dominates by all physical means at his disposal.

Royce Gracie, son of Carlos Gracie and disciple of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, entered the cage against Art Jimmerson, a 90-kilogram professional boxer wearing only one glove. In under two minutes, Royce submitted his opponent with a rear-naked choke. The arena was stunned: a lightweight fighter controlled a giant through technique, strategy, and knowledge of the human body. The logic of Greek *pankration*—strike, grab, control—manifested in its most modern and effective form.

Then came Gerard Gordeau, a Dutch kickboxer, and Ken Shamrock, a Japanese pro wrestler and "Pancrase Hybrid Wrestling" pioneer. Royce dominated them all, using locks, chokes, and throws to finish fights quickly, despite weight and style differences. For the first time in 2,500 years, the idea of total combat, where nothing is forbidden, was displayed to the world.

Newspapers screamed scandal. U.S. senators threatened to ban the event. But it was too late: ancient *pankration* had been resurrected under a new name—Mixed Martial Arts. The sport quickly drew millions of viewers and spread worldwide. Thirty-two years later, the UFC had become an international institution: $12 billion in revenue, broadcasts in 170 countries, arenas packed to watch two fighters applying exactly the principles Arrhichion embodied in Olympia in 648 BCE.

From the frescoes of Beni Hassan to the UFC cage, through the Olympic stadiums, medieval fairs in Provence, and arenas in Japan and Brazil, the story is clear: humanity has never stopped asking the same question, one that has persisted for 4,000 years of martial practice. Who is the best when nothing is forbidden? And for 4,000 years, the answer has remained the same: the one who masters both fists and grappling. *Pankration* never disappeared. It changed name, continent, and century, but the blood, sweat, and submission remain unchanged.

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