

# Historical presentation of pankration from antiquity to its modern rebirth

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## Abstract

Pankration is a combating sport of ancient Greece. It was a full contact sport which used mixed techniques taken from boxing and wrestling. It had also developed its own ones like grappling, kicking, or breaking the opponent's bones. It was one of the most beloved sports in ancient Greece and not only. After its incorporation in the ancient Olympic Games, it developed unique regulations, strict methods of training, and nutrition directions for the athletes or else the "pankratiasts". However, pankration was used from the ancient Greeks not just as a sport. It was the combat craft used by the Hoplites, the ancient greek soldiers, in real battle crashing the enemies, either defending or offending. While we moved on from the Classical and Hellenistic age to the Medieval, the sport declined and survived with different names and forms around the eastern Mediterranean sea until the 20<sup>th</sup> century when an attempt of rebirth started. Finally, the sport takes international recognition by starting from its birth place, Greece, and expanding worldwide, following the expectation to be included again in the Olympic Games.

**Keywords:** Sports History, Combat Sports, Pankration, Ancient Greece, Ancient Olympic Games, Full Contact Sport.

## INTRODUCTION

Pankration, an ancient sport, stems from the human's need for battle in order to domain or survive. Nowadays there are many viewpoints about the time and the place of its birth, and its change from an immiscibly martial art to a sport followed by game's regulations. It is ancient Greeks' characteristic martial art. Its name also defines its type (Pan + Kration) which means "the person who owns the whole power" or "in force". The same sport is referred in ancient sources as "pammahon" (from the greek pan=all and mahi=combat) which indicates that it is a "total combat". It is obvious, thus, the sport's popularity and fame in the ancient years. In order to boost the above, the Greeks had given the name "Pankratis" to Jupiter, who was the King and the strongest of people and gods. The sport is separated in two parts; the stand up and the rolling down pankration. It involves several types of techniques from punches and kicks to dislocation

grasps and all of them are categorized with specific terminology taken and retained from the ancient Greek. The athletes were practiced with particular training methods in the sound of a flute whereas they followed diet that was congruent with the sport's needs. This sport-martial art totally existed in the ancient Greek's daily life in all of its forms. After the Romans' ascendancy over the Greek and Hellenistic grounds, the sport survived with different names in areas of eastern Mediterranean. There are also references that pankration survived even in the mid and upper East – until its rebirth in Greece in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The sport received acrid critic from the sport community and especially from the area of combating sports. The critic concerned whether modern pankration is the continuity of the ancient one or a mixture of wrestling, mill or other techniques or it trades upon the name and the fame of the ancient combating

sport. Despite the above critics, pankration resulted in its official recognition, growth and spread among the combative and no combative world and in the creation of official leagues worldwide.

The goal of the current article is multifaceted. Its initial goal is to make better known the history of pankration and its direct and indissoluble relation to the ancient Greeks' life. An additional aim, is to make the reader aware of the way the athletes practiced sports and the benefits they get in the ancient Greek times. Finally, the goal of the article is to array elements about the anabiosis and the spread of the sport to the modern world. The theories and the myths are several about the birth of pankration.

The most widespread theory advocates that pankration did not have its roots in ancient times or in mythology as Greeks supported, but its creation took place later. The proof is that a) the sport entered the Olympic Games in the 33<sup>rd</sup> Olympiad (648 BC) for the men where the winner was Syrakousios Ligdamis; in the 145<sup>th</sup> (200 BC) for children and the winner was Fedimos from Troad and also b) there are not clear written references to its name before the 5<sup>th</sup> B.C century. However, if we do not search for the notion "pankration" as a word, we can find references even in the Homer as there are descriptions that somebody could say mirror techniques that stem from pankration: "He said and lifted him. Odysseus never mishit deceits and hit him at the sunken of the knee. He supinated together with Odysseus right on the chest." (Iliad, Ψ 725-730). In this quotation, derived from Iliad, is described Odysseus wrestling with Aiantas, the mythic king of Salamis, during the Trojan War that dates back to 1100-1200 B.C. Another reference to Pindar, an ancient greek lyric poet, transfers Pankratio's invention much earlier, from Theseus, the king of Athens during the Minoan naval supremacy and according to the myth when it confronted Minotaur: "Those who consider pankration as immemorial and say that Theseus wrestled with minotaur by using pankration techniques.", (Commentor of Pindar, Nemeonikas, ode 5<sup>n</sup>, 89a). It is probable that Minoans, in the ancient kingdom of Crete, practiced in pankration, too. This becomes obvious from "The byword of sports" found in Trinity of Crete and dates back to 1500 B.C. In this byword several scenes are depicted that indicate young men who practice with nelsons and techniques that simulate pankration. Also, there is a written reference to the existence of Pankration in "Argonautika", the poems written by Orpheus describing the argonautic expedition: "Then, because of pankration, he gave as an award to Hercules a manifold crater." (Orphica, Argonautica I.586). This quote describes Hercules' award for his victory in pankration which was a silver manifold crater. It's obvious that ancient writers characterized pankration as a well known ancient sport during the Argonautic expedition ≈1360 B.C. Thus, it is clear why ancient people tended to give a mythological origin to

pankration. However, the difficulty of the case is to discern, regardless of the sport's antiquity, when its transition from a martial art to an official sport took place.

## Regulations

In this pankration sport, all the hits are allowed, including those of boxing and wrestling except for bites and take out of the eyes: "Because he watched many of the athletes to wrestle like roosters without using pankratic moves and by going against the match's terms.", (Lucian, Dimonaktos Vios, 49). Allowed actions were the encounter and the trip of the rival, the strangling and the dipping one another in muck or sand. The athlete was forbidden to put one of his fingers into the opponent's nose or mouth, yet he has the right to slip or break the opponent's bones. Additionally he had the right to bestride his opponent and pass his arm under his neck and drown him...: "He passed his ell under his neck.", (Lucian, Anaxarsis, 9). Concerning pankration sport's technique was divided into two parts:

- The "Up or Stand up Pankration" subsumed orthowrestling, and the athletes had the chance to hit a member of the same team by using one of their body's members (fists/elbows/kicks/knees/pushes/head).
- The "Down Pankration or rolling" decided the victory and looked like wrestling. Athletes used wrestling grasps or disjointment grasps. Furthermore, it was allowed for the pankratiast to overpower the opponent by his one hand and hit him by using the other.

The terminology of the techniques in the ancient pankration as also in the modern, is officially in the ancient Greek language and only a small number of them can be translated verbatim. So it is purposeful to present them word for word in latin characters. Some typical techniques follow:

- "Ignion afairesis" (Hocks' deduction): kick to the flexors of the knee.
- "Empidon lax" (Leap kicking): airy kick.
- "Pternizein": hit with the heel.
- "Gastrizein": hit to the belly with the sole (area below the toes)
- "Emvoli kriou" (Ramming): hit with the head-on bone.
- "Aramenos ek toin skeloin": grappling and over by grasp to both legs.
- "Sfyra kai xearas strevlousin": wrestling for arms' and legs' warp.

## Training methods / ways

In ancient world, athletes' practice took place basically in "palaestra" or arena. Before they started exercising, they had an adaptable massage and anointed their body or they threw gravel on it. The inunction did not cover all the body, only till the belly button: "No young anointed way over his belly button.", (Aristophanes, Nefeles, 977).

At the end of the exercise, the oil and the dust were removed from the body with a special tool, called "stlegida" which means scraper. Then, a full recovery massage and a bath full of cold water followed as they believed that warm water promoted self-indulgence, and degenerated the athletic hypostasis: "Jupiter! Indeed the good man shouldn't intoxicate and have warm baths, as you do..", (Athinaios). Their exercises had logical progressive intention as they decided according their age, the time and the weather conditions. Before and after the main exercise, it is said that Spartans used as warming up and full recovery exercises respectively dance festivals "pyrrhichizein kai karyatizein" or games: "because when they perform the handling and hit each other, they stop to dance and the match ends.", (Lucian, Peri Orchiseos 10). At this point it becomes obvious that ancients' training based on the triptych: a) warming up, b) main part and c) recovery, the same as today.

There are cases where athletes were not aware of how to have been practiced, therefore they battled horses, caught rabbits, fight bulls and trailed buggies or bended irons and lifted stones. ( Philostratos, Gymnastikos 1).

There was a great number and variety of exercises that athletes of pankration used in order to boost their abilities:

- They came to blows in pairs and attempted upturn each other.
- The athletes of pankration battle at road, ad loc jump and springs and kicks on the air: "they were hopping while they were running and by staying at the same point they kicked midair.", (Lucian, Anaxarsis, 4).
- Their training was leathery with forceful hits to the opponent without comprising empathy for the opponent/member of the team: "With no evilness, they hit each other. ", (Lucian, Anaxarsis, 6).
- "Pyx atremeizein" (Orivasios, 6 .12.), the athletes put their arms in front and kept them in this position a lot of time and if they wanted to size the burden either they held dumbbell or somebody of the same team pushed their arms downwards.
- Bounces on a jump rope, "diekpeidan".
- "Pyrrhichios" (Plato, Laws, 815-a.), was a rhythmic martial dance athlete used to mime techniques of attack or abjuring.
- Fighting with shadows. They execute techniques of attack and defense with a simulated opponent-shadow. The right breath was of great significance and usually took place by accompaniment.
- "Korykos" (Boxing Bag). It is the ancient form of the modern punching bag. It was filled with sand and short. The Pankration "korykos" was bigger and heavier from the punching bag, so that the athletes to enhance their balance e.g return after the striking. Koryko's height was about 1,50 m and weighed over 50 kg..
- "Platanistas". Spartans, well known for their love in hardening, exerted pankration indirectly in the following way: Teens came in an island, in the middle of the river

- Evrotas, covered by sycamores and divided into 2 groups. Bridges-channels were removed and each group should push the other one into the river by using several ways. The most basic one was undoubtedly the exercise of pankration.

- "Tetras" (Quadruplet). The quadruplet was a training system lasted 4 days. The tutorial practice occurred in the first day where the athlete by doing intense and difficult exercises should "awaken" his muscles, strengthen and prepare his body for the next day. "Accentuation" took place in the second day and it was the hardest training. In this phase the athlete's body and spirit went to extremes. "Comfort" of the third day was a light program with smooth moves and its goal was just to activate the exhausted body from the previous day and assist it to recover fully. In the last day, known as "middle", the athlete did regular exercises, avoidances and self-control.

### **Pankration games' carrying out**

Information about pankration games' carrying out is drafted from references to Panhellenic games (Olympia, Pythia, Isthmia, Nemea). Athletes divided in categories according to their age and not their weight as it is used today. Categories varied from two to five. In infrequent cases, the athlete could compete in different category from the one he has already voted to belong. The pairs were decided after a draw. According to Loucian the draw took place in a silver poll with small wooden lots that were equal in their size and letters were incised on them. Athletes, who drew similar lots, battle together. In case the number of athletes was single, then there was a lot without an incised letter and the athlete who drew this lot, promoted to the next phase without battle and his name was "reserve".

We do not know the precise dimensions of the playing field, but we suppose that it would be similar to the one of today. When an athlete went out, then they interrupted the play and they restarted it from the last point.

The games did not have the same duration and continued until the announcement of a winner. In some cases and after an agreement, athletes went for a break and continued the game later on. In this case and when the game is suspenseful, the process of "scale" was applied. The two athletes remained immovable and with a draw the one hit the other without having the right to self-preserving. This harsh process ended certainly the game, whereas the end was sometimes followed by death, as it happened in the case of Krevga who was laurelled dead as a winner because the opponent's hit was judged as irregular.

Additionally, there were cases where athletes said uncle by raising up their right hand and the index finger up. This regulation had as a result Spartans' gradual detachment from martial sports as they considered opprobrious to confess their defeat to their homeland.

Athletes' participation in one of the above sports was allowed and sometimes they had the right to change the time of happening so as athletes to be facilitated. Athletes, who had been stated to participate in the first day, did not have the right to back away and if they did it they would have been punished. Reversely, in some cases, critiques had the right to give the victory to an athlete without having been participated even from their impression from the athlete's training. This could become safer in wrestle where the training was like a game in contrast to pankration where training differed from the game's conditions. This victory was called "akoniti" that is to say without athletes' dusting in the playing field. Akoniti victory in pankration is referred once at 480 B.C. where it was given by critics in order to punish Diogenis.

From the pankration sport, references about bribery are not absence as it happens in the majority of the heavy sports in the Olympic Games.

### Nutrition

The nutrition of athlete's of pankration and athletes' of heavy sports in general present some singularities in reference to other athletes of other sports nutrition. Regarding their diet, source of information is Galinos (130-200 A.C.) and Filostratos (2<sup>nd</sup> century A.C.).

- From Filostratos source, we have references about particular food including pies made by barley, bread without barm, prepared by unbolted wheat and beef's, bull's, goat's or roe deer's meat.

- According to recent research (Ryan J. Allan, MD, 1968), the first athletes fed on figs, cheese and bread, and drank milk or wine mixed with water. After the 6<sup>th</sup> B.C, athletes of heavy sports started putting meat in their diet.

- Due to the sport's intension, strain and time to be completed, it could be ranked among the semina stamina sports because it participates in both the aerobic and anaerobic function of energy production in athletes' body. Therefore, Galinos advocates that athletes' food should have been fatty and indigestible in order to have "combustible content" during their heavy sport.

### Pankration in ancients' daily life

Pankration, except for its athletic form, was mainly a martial art, in which at least Greeks of Classical Times trained in mass and applied it with great success in Persian wars. Young people practiced a lot in this sport especially in paleastras, and according to the ancients, this reflected their character, personality and the way of living. It was an integral part of a Greek's life, either the Greek citizen-soldier or benign and gullible, as it has been formulated in the ancient Greek cities-states. Pankration was an esteemed sport and during Macedonia's growth. Philip's B' and Alexander's troops that broke down the Persian Empire, seem to apply

perfectly pankration as those of Classical Times. Pankration was indissoluble connected with the whole Greek mythology from Titanomachy and Jupiter's wrestle with Titanas, Saturn's father to Nemea's strangulation from Hercules. It also existed in ancients' arts from sculpture to poetry. There were also a lot of representations including games and trainings either on frescos, vessels and sculptures, or laudations of important pankration athletes on poems and odes.

### The route from the ancient world until now

The Olympic Games, after their official interruption by Theodosios A', who was the emperor in 393 A.C., continued acting out until 520 A.C., in Antiochia, along with Pankration as a sport. Pankration seemed to survive with the following names; as "pammahos" in Cyprus during the Byzantine years (5<sup>th</sup> A.C.), as "klotsata" the meta Byzantine era, as "laktes" the middle (15<sup>th</sup>) and as "patsos-klotsos" posterior until the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rigas Feraios refers to pankration in its "Prologue" (Feraios Rigas, Athens 1815, "The Olympics" translation) and confirms that the sport was alive in Thessaly during his lifetime (at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> A.C.).

It becomes clear, therefore, that Pankration survived in different forms during centuries and different places of eastern Mediterranean. In the world of sports, yet, there are some viewpoints that should be included here, too, although they are not welcome from the international scientific world. Thus, it is considered that by Great Alexander's spread and Greek civilization's spread towards East and Asia, respectively, Pankration and its philosophy transmitted to indigenous populations of those areas and affected the development of several eastern martial arts.

In this way, we reach the first modern Olympic Games of 1896, where pankration was not included in the catalogue of sports, a fact that disappointed a great number of scientists such as C. Tsounta, an archaeologist of Classical Era, who refers that in case an ancient Greek could possibly arise and watch the modern Olympic Games, he would be badly surprised to see that sports like pankration or boxing or pentathlon, the most beloved ones for him were absent from the Olympic games, but other, new and unknown ones had been included: "However, what would be the impression for one of the ancient Greeks, if he woke up from lethargy, walked and sat between you? He would realize that some sports he was used to, they missed from the program, and he would be present in those who had never seen to take place in ancient stadiums and gymnasiums. He would be really astonished of the pankration and pentathlon's absence." , (Savvidis E. Lazaros, June 2004, p.64) whereas pankration was a noble sport, not only due to its philosophy, but also its practice. Only do unhistorical people consider pankration as an atrocious sport (Waldo E. Sweet, 1987).

## Pankration's rebirth

The first attempts for pankration's return to Greece launched between the decades '60-'70 when the activation of several factors began. Similar attempts happened earlier by the historian Siet Lentin in Uppsala and Dimitrios Arvanitis, respectively. Perhaps, the most significant offer and activity was Simos Zachopoulos' who was a coach in martial arts in Kavala and considered as the person who revived the sport. Until 1995 a great bafflement dominated in the area of martial arts in Greece, a fact that didn't allow the sport's rebirth. When the former minister Mr. Liaskas took over, twenty five unions subscribed in all Greece and the Greek Federation of Pankration sport" was founded. This federation was recognized by the decision of General Sports' Secretary that instituted Pankration as an official sport with organization, regulations and its athletes' constitution. The officially recognized federation has as a goal the internationalization of the sport and its inclusion in the Olympic Games. However, the prerequisite is to propagandize the sport worldwide. Then, the European (EUPA, 1996) and Universal Federation (IFPA, 1999) were constituted. Nowadays, the Universal Federation counts 54 members –national federations worldwide, and the chair is Andreas Mazarakis. In Greece there are about 2000 unemployed active athletes in 127 unions (2009).

## Comparison with the ancient pankration

Today's form of pankration presents many similarities and differences to the ancient sport. The discussion is about whether these similarities and differences change the sport in something different or they are adaptations that could happen normally during the time. An initial difference is the "dressing" of athletes. Undoubtedly, nowadays, athletes could not be naked in battles. The official dressing denotes clearly the sport's country of origin. Blue and white is the Greek flag. Blue and white are the colours that symbolize our planet (Blue planet), and human's spirit clarity. Furthermore, the meander looms in two points. The official language of the sport is Greek which will be heard worldwide as long as the sport spreads. Techniques are taken from texts that describe wrestles and the way of training, and images from ancient vessels. However, today the harshness of wrestles and all of techniques are unattainable; hence arrangements and sport laws should have been filled and adapted.

## CONCLUSION

Concerning its techniques, pankration is one the most ancient and finished combating sports, as it promotes athlete's robustness, good style of living and many other effective characteristics. The steady sport arrangements,

techniques, and athletes' training methods/nutrition are indicative of the sport's strong significance and wide approval that period of time. It was basic element of ancient Greek citizen's life. Its survival during centuries was not an easy process, yet it survived with different names and variations in the sink of eastern Mediterranean. Today, after years' of attempt for sport's reconstruction and its essential survival, pankration is officially recognized, full of athletes and organizations worldwide.

## DISCUSSION

Pankration sport, in spite of its official recognition and the presence of worldwide leagues, is a fully-discussed and ambiguous sport, especially when we refer to its origin. Is it indeed the advancement of ancient pankration or a failed attempt to trade upon ancient sport's name, a mixture of eastern techniques to serve different interests? Additionally, theories stemming from combating sports' world are under discussion, especially whether posterior eastern martial arts are attributed to pankration sports presence.

Finally, if pankration shows credibility and confirms its connection to its glorious past, it could probably be subsumed in the Olympic Games and then, according to author's viewpoint, be promoted as a national martial art of modern Greeks.

A good start to the discussion about Pankration is Mr. Thomas, a Professor of History and Sports in the Department of Physical Education. After the watch of pankration fights in the foundations of the International Olympic Academy, he announced: "It's true that what I watched was pankration. Those fights represent pankration. You have done worthy work. Although there is a need of proving that, it seems that the origin of eastern combat sports lies in ancient Greece..." (Savvidis E. Lazaros, June 2004).

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