

## Ancient Greek Athletics and Violence

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In an era where man's moral standards are tested by material social trends, the phenomenon of violence proliferates to an irrepressible degree imposing catastrophic results in many areas of society. Violence is not excluded even from competitive athletics, the very expression of a healthy life. However the aim of this study is not to go along with or adopt these examples but underline the significance of these forms of violence in Ancient Greek athletic games.

The research will be restricted to a selection of particularly provocative examples of violence in sport but all these forms of athletics which are generated from instinct taken in context seem legitimate. A certain creativity can be discerned on assessment of the facts based on the mark they have left on history. Reference will not be made to biological reasons or sociological problems that have a direct relationship to violence; neither shall inclusion or explanation be made about violence as part of the instinctive "laws of conflict"<sup>1</sup>.

The word violence is found in Ancient Greek writing and its meanings are varied. Homer uses violence to mean courage, strength, power, the might of domination<sup>2</sup>, the taking of human life<sup>3</sup> and psychological violence<sup>4</sup>. He refers to physical bodily violence, physical assault, violent behavior, extortion coercion and force<sup>5</sup>. Hesiod distinguishes two types of violence, which are conflicting: Hateful<sup>6</sup>, which is represented by war, and Peaceful<sup>7</sup>, which is expressed by creativity in society. As time passed violence was personified<sup>8</sup> or was expressed as potential violence<sup>9</sup>; whereas in Attic law we come across it interpreted as usurpation<sup>10</sup>.

Here we will concentrate on examples of violence in athletics, assessing the factors principally of most benefit to the course of Greek athletics. Kazantzakis, puzzled by the nature of conflict, declared that without crucifixion there could be no resurrection<sup>11</sup>, and Christianity would not have been confirmed... The violence of the crucifixion is imperative... in whatever period, relative to the aim being served.

Significantly and relatively evidence of human violence of a conscious nature, make up the events described in Ancient Greek writings such as theomachy (battles of the gods)<sup>12</sup>, titanomachy (battles of the titans)<sup>13</sup> and centaumachy (battles of the centaurs)<sup>14</sup>. Irrefutable evidence, that under

analysis reveal as their basis a statement of bodily violence of a dominant human creativity.

In the Minoan era, in agreement with the fact that mythology constitutes the historic nucleus of the past<sup>15</sup>, the human tax that was paid by Athens to Crete was a prize to the winners of Games organized by Minos. Thanks to the brute force of Theseus and his conquering of the unyielding Minotaur, symbolically, Athens is released from its obligation of the human sacrifice<sup>16</sup>. In the same period the son of Minos, Androgeos took part in the Attica Games, the Panathinian, and was claimed all-round champion. His opponents, in jealousy of his supremacy, set an ambush and killed him as he was on his way to Thebes to take part in the funeral games in honor of Laius<sup>17</sup>. This action was sacrilegious and divine retribution caused horrendous disease in Attica<sup>18</sup>. Following this at the command from Delphi the Athenians, inhabitants of Attica, freed themselves of the infection by honoring the dead hero with funeral games "The Androgea"<sup>19</sup>.

Again in the same era the God Zeus came from Crete to Olympia, a symbolic religious action of the Minoan Crete against the Mycenaean civilization. There followed a violent theomachy between Zeus and his father Cronos, a wrestling contest that confirmed Zeus as the overlord of the human conscience<sup>20</sup>. This battle deposed the despotic and violently behaved Cronos and established a new Olympic philosophy<sup>21</sup>, hence creating a link between prehistoric phenomenon of the Olympic Games and the new Olympic ideology. The Great artist sculptor Phidius was inspired by these Myths to create the Statue of Zeus made of ivory and gold, with a silver olive wreath, as an Olympic Champion, that stood in the nave of the temple of Olympia. This statue is one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

In the Mycenaean era, the Funeral Games, the Patroclean Games<sup>22</sup>, in honor of Patroclus were held. During the games, to be exact during the harness race, the young Antilochus, Nestora's son, broke the rules by dangerously blocking his opponent's way. Menelaus' chariot was nearly overturned and he lost the first race. Menelaus who felt unjustly treated, protested and made the formal complaint that he had lost by unfair means. This is the first recorded incident in the history of sport. Antilochus was made to swear, with his hand on the head of a horse, symbolizing God Ippios Poseidon, to his deed. The young man conscious of his mistake confessed and blamed his youth for his overzealousness in the race<sup>23</sup>.

During the migration of the Dorians, a body of Dorians arrived and settled in Argolida. As they were passing through Corinth they committed a serious sacrilege. Hunted by the Dorians, the sisters Euritioni and Elliotia sought shelter and asylum in the temple of the Goddess Athena. The invaders desecrated the sanctity of the temple burning it, giving no possibility of escape to the sisters. Divine retribution came in the form of a plague of sickness on the Dorians from which they were freed only when they established a temple to the sisters Euritioni and Elliotia where they were

honored as demigoddesses and organized Funeral Games "the Ellotia" in honor of the sisters<sup>24</sup>.

The establishment of the Karnion Games in Sparta came about in a similar way. It is said that the Spartans once inflicted violence against the oracle Karnou killing him. Apollo, the protector of the families of prophets, for their action imposed an infection on their country. The Spartans released themselves from the contagion by organizing religious events in honor of the slaughtered oracle Karnou lasting nine days and named the Karnia<sup>25</sup>, after the oracle. These celebrations were among the greatest religious and competitive festivals in Sparta<sup>26</sup>.

By far the greatest amount and the severest legitimate violence is found in Ancient Sparta. Under the laws of Lacedaemon training and education was based on violence that had been legislated. The system of physical education was one of the severest forms of training, for example flagellation. This was mainly a religious exhibition of endurance in honor of Artemis, where youths would have their naked bodies flogged by Ephor, in front of the altar of Orthia<sup>27</sup>, withstanding the pain and so showing patience and bravery in the face of the death. The trial by flogging<sup>28</sup>, the severe "decree"<sup>29</sup>, took place every year<sup>30</sup>. We are told by Plutarch "the youths tolerated being whipped all day on the altar of Orthia Artemis having no fear to death, aiming at the victory"<sup>31</sup>. The winner of this contest "Bomonikis" (altar victor)<sup>32</sup>, apart from the laurel wreath<sup>33</sup> also had the right to a column dedicated to him in the temple<sup>34</sup> as well as his statue<sup>35</sup>. It should be noted that the loss of blood was often so much as to cause the death of the competitors. This event may well have stemmed from the remains of an older custom, that of human sacrifice.

In this procedure of flagellation, lawful bodily violence, young unmarried men were obliged to take part: "in Sparta during the religious ceremonies the women slapped the unmarried men around the altar"<sup>36</sup>, because these bachelors avoided marriage they did not fulfill the greatest aim of Spartan society the reprocreation of warriors and athletes.

The most significant political event and hence, the highest aim of the Olympic Games, was the establishment, in 884 BC<sup>37</sup>, of the convention of truce. The institution basically enforced and had to do with internal political violence, which is reflected in civil war and epidemics<sup>38</sup>. This represents a political event of great magnitude. Organized religion imposed the institution, with a view to the end of antagonism and violence amongst Greeks, initially for a month<sup>39</sup> and progressively to three months<sup>40</sup>. Thus giving a time to resolved differences without resorting to the use of weapons and at the same time to allow people to ponder whether hostile works should give way to peaceful ones.

In the west pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia the violent battle of Lapithae against the Centaurs was depicted<sup>41</sup>. The Myth refers to how the Lapithae, a cultivated people in Thessaly, invited their neighbours, the

Centaurs, who were uncouth and boorish, to a feast. The Centaurs during the festivities and under the influence of alcohol became violent attempting to abduct the Lapithae women. The Lapithae men and women fought back creating a defense. The work of art was created after the Persian war and represents the battle of the Lapithae against the perpetrators of brute violence the Centaurs<sup>42</sup>. Decoded it portrays the fight between good, the Lapithae and bad, the Centaurs, the fight of light against darkness, the Greeks and the Persians<sup>43</sup>, the Greeks being the reason that their passage towards Europe was barred.

The establishment of the four Pan-Hellenic Games is closely related to the event that introduced the element of violence. In particular the foundation of the Isthmus Games, according to Plutarch it is founded on the fact that Theseus used physical violence to kill a thief who happened to be his relative Sini or Skerona. To honor the dead and for appeasement for the murder, Funeral Games were held<sup>44</sup>. According to writers the god of light, Phivos Apollo, came from the east and settled in the area called Pitho-Delphi. The people were in awe of him and began to worship him after he had killed the Son of Gaea (Mother Earth), the monster Python<sup>45</sup>. The killer God put himself into self inflicted exile at Tembi and stayed there for eight years where he suffered atonement with laurel from the Minoan exorcist Karmanora. It is said that the God for self atonement put it into the minds of men to organize Funeral Games for the Son of Gaea<sup>46</sup>. That was also the reason why the temple of Apollo was built on the grave of the defeated mythological snake<sup>47</sup>.

We also come across examples of emotional violence. Let us take for example the strategy followed by Hippodamia the daughter of Oenomaus. Taking advantage of the love of her father's chariot keeper, Myrtilos, for her, she persuaded him that if he did as she instructed and during the chariot race, between Pelops and Oenomaus, he removed the spokes that supported the wheels of her fathers chariot thereby securing Pelops' win, she would reciprocate his feelings for her. The foolish youth being ruled by his emotions and without a thought for the folly of his actions, carried out Hippodamia's instructions so causing unintentional harm and contributing to the defeat and death of Oenomaus. This outcome left Hippodamia free to marry Pelops. To honor the dead and in appeasement for the murder, prehistoric Funeral Games were held which had a direct effect on the Olympic institution<sup>48</sup>.

Leading up to the Olympic period and during the Olympic Games "mastigophros" (a whip bearer) or "mastigonoms" (a whip master) or "ravdouchous" (a stick bearer) was made available to each Master of the Games to follow his orders. Any of the competitors who were found showing disrespect or breaking the rules of the Olympics would be severely punished<sup>49</sup>.

A demonstration of the compulsive human emotion is shown in the unusual incident involving violence against the statue of Theagenis from Thasio. He was an Olympic winner in boxing and pancratium and through out the country

had scored up no less than 1400 wins in local games and Pan-Hellenic Games and was honored accordingly by his state. After his death an enemy attacked his statue beating it with a stick, the statue it seemed had healing powers. One day the statue of the athlete became unbalanced and fell flattening and killing the enemy who had been beating it<sup>50</sup>. After this display of godly powers, which were attributed to Theagenis, the people started to worship the statue and Theagenis was treated as a God<sup>51</sup>.

There was also rough behaviour between athlete and trainer. The trainer of Mandromeni from Magnisio practiced psychological violence. He was so sure of the success of his athlete that in a letter to the athlete's mother he said: [if you hear that your son has died in the Games you should believe it but if you hear he has lost it will be untrue]<sup>52</sup>. A similar form of force was used by another trainer, that of the athlete Promacho from Pellini. The athlete was in love so his trainer informed him: [the girl you love will submit to your love only if you return as an Olympic winner]. This form of emotional violence had the desired effect<sup>53</sup>.

The trainer Erixias used the same kind of force on the athlete Arra(i)chion in the Olympic stadium. During the Olympic Games, Erixia, who was watching from the trainer's area, noticed that the athlete was showing a lack of endurance and fighting spirit. So to goad him into a better performance and to continue with the games he shouted out loud: [Death is a wonderful thing at Olympia, do not submit], that is to say that he should not raise his hand admitting defeat<sup>54</sup>. Again this form of emotional coercion proved successful as Arrachion gathered all his strength together and as he seemed to be succumbing to the grip of opponent, he managed to withstand him by forcing his hand on his opponent's foot causing such pain that his opponent was forced into admitting defeat. Arrachion set off for the Elysian Fields crowned with the wreath of an Olympic victor<sup>55</sup>!

The fighter Gerivos came from the Greek colony of Navkrati in Egypt. He had won many victories particularly at Olympia, returning to his home the Olympic Champion celebrated his win. However the next day at the Gymnasium he did not feel like exercising. He expressed his unwillingness but given the professional standards of the time the trainer insisted that it would interrupt his training and the programme and so not wanting to displease the trainer took part in the day training that had the extra burden of the demanding "Gymnastikis tetradas" (four gymnastic days), "epitasin" (the most demanding day). As Filostratos inform us the athlete died of exhaustion from this exercise during the training from a problem with his heart and circulation<sup>56</sup>.

The next example occurs in the stadium in Nemeus. The boxing event lasted a long time and from objective assessments of the athletes they didn't show enough fighting spirit and the spectators became bored. In a similar instance, where the people of Argos were the organizers, they stopped the Games and used the rule of "pigmachiki klimaka" (each fighter was given one blow to decide the outcome of the match) taking into account the profit and prestige

involved. During the "klimama" the use of violence was permissible. The first athlete was Krevgas from ancient Epidamno, today's Durrës in Albania. He gave a free hit to the face of his opponent Damoxenos from Syracuse who stood without moving. Next Damoxenos told his opponent to raise his hand and with stretched fingers and nails out he gave him a powerful hit cutting below the ribs. Such was the force of the blow that his fingers pierced the flesh and caught hold of his guts. The blow that Damoxenos dealt was impermissible because it was unorthodox. He had not hit with his fist as is the way in boxing it was also considered compound. The organizers of the Games using the rules of the games against him deemed the dead Krevgas the winner saying that Damoxenos had used excessive violence to win the fight<sup>57</sup>.

The exclusion of athletes from track events in Nemea is another example. Idas was taking part in a race and was entered for a total of five athletes. A little before the end of the race he would do anything to win and so caught hold of his opponents hair so reducing his speed and managing to take the first place for himself<sup>58</sup>.

A display of violent behaviour was recorded in the 218<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games from Appolonio from Alexandria the so called Randi. The athlete was late arriving for the Games and so his opponent Irakledis was declared the winner without a contest-taking place<sup>59</sup>. His excuse for being late did not satisfy the judges and he became angry at their decision and reacted violently towards the winner.

Charges of inappropriate behaviour were also brought against a trainer in the children's section of boxing at the stadium of Olympia. Glavko from Karisto was not very skilled while competing in the final with a skilled opponent he was beating him easily without his opponent trying very hard. Glavko's trainer Tisia's, or his father as it is said, worried about the outcome of the match put into Glavko's mind a scene on his farm where he was trying to mend a share that had come off of a plough and to punch his opponent as if he was punching the share back into place. Without losing a moment Tisia's stood up and shouted to his athlete to act as if he was a farmer: "remember when you fixed the plough". Glavko envisaged the pastoral scene and managed to give his opponent a blow so strong but lawful that he knocked his opponent out<sup>60</sup>.

Lawful physical violence is strongly manifest in boxing particularly when the hand straps were changed from ox leather, "meilchios"<sup>61</sup>, to that of pig skin<sup>62</sup> straps this made the punches all the more dangerous and caused wounds that did not heal easily. This was permissible and done mainly for the spectator's pleasure. These demands from the spectators were due to their repression, more because of pressure from political and social areas rather than from any athletic ideology.

Athletics never really cultured violence and most of the competitors were not violent either. It is man who uses sport as an expression of violence! Violence lawful or unlawful appears to form human emotion in the Ancient Greek

sports arena as well. We need to assess all the events according to the period they took place in and to the laws and the morals of the time so that the violence can be seen as an expression of religious atonement, redemption and freedom. Violence plays a dual role serving as an escape from repressed emotions but at the same time forwarding and improving ideology. The use of violence was present in the role of enforcing the law; this was an accepted part of their society, whereas psychological aggression brought out the power of emotion and soul. The facts should always be taken in context, of course we are unequivocally against violence, which breaks down the structure of society and creates disfunction.

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<sup>1</sup> See Berliux Monique: "Athlitismos, ginekes, via." ["Athletics, Women, Violence."] *Minutes of International Olympic Academy*. Ancient Olympia, 1983 pp 162 - 169

<sup>2</sup> Iliad B 658, see Pindar: P. 8.19 4.379 1.8.116 N.5.22 10.138 11.19, Souda exc: "via" ["violence"].

<sup>3</sup> See Odysseus k 219, ê 6.

<sup>4</sup> Iliad G 45.

<sup>5</sup> Iliad O 105, Odysseus o 329, see *Minutes IOA* 1983, 162.

<sup>6</sup> Hesiod: *Erga kai Imerai* [*Works and Days*] 13-14: 'For one fosters evil war and battle'

<sup>7</sup> Hesiod: *Works and Days* 24-25: 'This Strife is wholesome for men', Homeric Hymns 2,412 – 413.

<sup>8</sup> Aeschylus: *Prometheus* 12: 'state and violence for you'.

<sup>9</sup> Aeschylus: *The Eumenides* 5, Sophocles: *Oedipus Rex or Oedipus Tyrannus* 805, Herodotus: VI 107

<sup>10</sup> Annotator, Plato *Republic* 464<sup>E</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Kazantzakis Nikos: *The Greek Passion*. Athens 1981 p.24, also see Luke 23, 25,33 24,3 John 19,6 20,11-13

<sup>12</sup> Plato: *Republic* 378.

<sup>13</sup> Hesiod: *Theogony* 729-820, Athenaeus VII 277,5, Diodorus I 97

<sup>14</sup> Pausanias V 10,8.

<sup>15</sup> Skarlatos Dimitris of Bizantiou: *Lexicon Ellenikis Glossis* [*Greek language Dictionary*]. Athens 1879, p. 365, exc.: (Myth is false words depicting truth)

<sup>16</sup> Plutarch: *Theseus*, para 19

<sup>17</sup> Apollodorus III 209-210, comp. Diodorus IV 60, see Pausanias I 27,10

<sup>18</sup> Plutarch: *Theseus*, para. 15: Destruction in Athens.

<sup>19</sup> Isihios exc: " Games in Eurigie".

<sup>20</sup> Pausanias VIII 2,2.

<sup>21</sup> Chrisostomos Dion: *Olympic Speech* XII 176A1.

<sup>22</sup> Iliad Ps 251-897.

<sup>23</sup> Iliad Ps 581-585.

<sup>24</sup> Athenaeus XV 678A, see annotator Pindar O.13.56: a comment on these particular Games.

<sup>25</sup> Herodotus VII 206 VIII 72, Athenaeus IV 141, Callimachos Hymns 2.70-87. annotator Pindar P.5.106 see "inscriptions by Amicleus" A.E. 1882 numb. 2,8 pp 20,25.

<sup>26</sup> Herodotus VII 206 VIII 72, Thucydides V 75, M P Nillson: *Elleniki Laiki Thriskia* [*A History of Greek Religion*. Oxford.] Athens 1977, p 119.

<sup>27</sup> Xenophon: *The Polity of the Lacedaemonians* 9, comp., Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 18 IG IV <sup>2</sup> 495,502, V<sup>1</sup> 257, 290: (Winning endurance Games in honour of Orthia), Pausanias II 24,5 III 11,9 –10 16,7 16,10-11, see Philostratus: *Gymnastikos*, 58

<sup>28</sup> Flavius Philostratus: *The life of Apollonius*. VI, chapter 20 & VII chapter 42: "endurance games".

<sup>29</sup> Philostratus: *Gymnastikos* 58.

<sup>30</sup> Plutarch: *Moralia* 239d or "Ta palaia ton Lacedaimonion epittitdevmata" [Ancient Lacedaemon achievements].

- <sup>31</sup> Plutarch: *Moralia* 239c, see Philostratus: *Gymnastikos* 38, according to Lucian: *Anacharsis*, [*Anacharsia or Athletics*] 38 'flogged on the altar till their blood ran'.
- <sup>32</sup> C.I.G. Sect. III 136d 'youth altar winner', also see Moretti Luigi: *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche*. Roma 1953, note no. 10 p 21 " vomon nikasas" ( altar victor) inscription from 500-480 BC.
- <sup>33</sup> IG V<sup>1</sup> 258. for worship of Goddess, see Kardara Chrisoula: *Lacedaemon*. Athens 1979, pp 274-287.
- <sup>34</sup> Gilbert: *History of Ancient Greek Literature*. Athens 1897, p 77, see Christou Ch: *Archaia Sparti [Ancient Sparta]*. Sparta 1960, pp 77-78, on p 74 ref to '130 such tablets have been found that were dedicated by the winners of different events' they date from 400 BC, Kardara: *Lacedaemon*, p 279.
- <sup>35</sup> Lucian: *Anacharsis* 38 'putting up statues to publicly honour the champions of Sparta'
- <sup>36</sup> Athenaeus XIII 555.
- <sup>37</sup> Panphilou Efsevios: *Chroniko, Chronicles*, speech A chap. 19 p222.
- <sup>38</sup> Pausanias V 4, 6: ' Greece was corrupted by civil wars and infectious diseases' see Souda, exc: 'truce'
- <sup>39</sup> Souda exc: "ierominia", "sacred month", see Pindar, N.3.2. Thucydides, III 56.
- <sup>40</sup> Andronicus Manolis: *Ta mouseia, I Olimpia*, [*Greek Museums, Olympia*, Melissa Media]. Athens, 1975, p 7,
- <sup>41</sup> Pausanias V 10,8 19, 7-8.
- <sup>42</sup> Kardara Ch.: *I thriskevtiki kai politiki simasia ton aetomaton tis Olympias [The religious and political significance of Olympia's pediments]*. Athens, 1978, p. 70
- <sup>43</sup> Andronicus: *Ta mouseia*, [*Greek Museums*] p.8, Kardara: *I thriskevtiki [The religious]*, pp 70-73.
- <sup>44</sup> Pario Chronico I G XII5 444, comp. Plutarch: *Theseus* 29.
- <sup>45</sup> Pausanias X 6,6 see Pithicos Nomos (Pithico Law), Pausanias X 7,2. Stravonas 421. Polydectes 4.48. A Mommsen: *Delphica*. Leipzig, 1878, pp 172, 194, 285, 294.
- <sup>46</sup> I G XII5 444 Ptolemy Hephaestus Hennou, 153<sup>a</sup>, Photios library, Vol 3, Paris 1962, p 70. 'Apollo fulfils a memorial for Python', Klimi Alexandreias: *Stromatikos Protreptikos*, I book VII verse 10-12 'celebration on the grave of the dead monster'. Kordatos John: *I prohistoria tou athlismou [Prehistory of athletics]*. Athens (nd) p 22., Lecatsas Panagiotis: *I psichi [The soul]*. Athens, 1975 p 253.
- <sup>47</sup> Souda, exc: 'Gis omphalos...' [*Navel of Earth.*] , *Isihios* exc. 'toxiou', annotator Pindar to do with Python.
- <sup>48</sup> See Pausanias V 21,3 see Gialouris Nikolaos: *Istoria Olympiakon Agonon [History of Olympic games]*. Athens 1976, p 82, 'Pelops holds a Funeral Games to atone for the death of Oenomaus' H Bengtson: *Die Olympischen Spiele in der antike*. Stuttgart 1972 p29. Nikitas Dimitris: *Elliniki Mythologia [Greek Mythology]*. vol 3, Athens 1986, p 237.
- <sup>49</sup> Lucian: *Ermotimos* 40, see Philostratos: *Gymnastikos*, Polydectes: *Onomastikos* III 145. 154: "Ravdouhos", annotator Plato: *Republic*, 405 C, Kitriniari K.: *Philostratos Gymnastikos*, Athens (nd), p 116 and note 151.
- <sup>50</sup> See more Pausanias VI 6,5-6 11,2-9 15,3. Chrisostomos Dion: *Speech* 31 617 RI.
- <sup>51</sup> Papahatzis Nikolaos: *Pafsaniou periigisis Messiniaka-Iliaka*. Athens 1982 p 348 note 2: in the agora at Thasos the temple of the deified Olympic champion Theageni.
- <sup>52</sup> Philostratos: *Gymnastikos* 23.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid 22.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid 21: "Death is a wonderful thing at Olympia, do not submit", Pausanias VIII 40,1 – 3.
- <sup>55</sup> Philostratos: *Eikones B*, [*Imaginers B*] verses 1-5. see Pausanias ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> Philostratos: *Gymnastikos* 54.
- <sup>57</sup> Pausanias VIII 40 3-5.
- <sup>58</sup> Statius (Poplius Papinius), *Thivais* 6, 555-645
- <sup>59</sup> Pausanias V 21, 12-14.
- <sup>60</sup> Philostratos: *Gymnastikos* 20, see Pausanias VI 10,1.
- <sup>61</sup> Pausanias VIII 40,3.
- <sup>62</sup> Philostratos: *Gymnastikos* 10.



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