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Published online: June 2019.

### To cite this article:

Chondronasios N. Charilaos (2019) ORIGIN AND SOCIAL STATUS OF THE TOP WRESTLERS IN THE ANCIENT GREEK WORLD. International Journal of Wrestling Science, 9:1, 34-39.



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# ORIGIN AND SOCIAL STATUS OF THE TOP WRESTLERS IN THE ANCIENT GREEK WORLD

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## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts initially the geographical classification of the recorded Olympic victors and Olympians of antiquity in 3 different historical periods, the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic periods. We will then attempt to analyze the social profile of the top wrestlers based mainly on references by ancient historians, writers but lyrical poets who recorded information about the social position and personal life of renowned wrestlers of that time. References to contemporary historical and archaeological finds will also help us to highlight the reasons that the Peloponnese maintains its successes from the beginnings of the recorded Olympic Games to the beginning of the Roman era and the presence and role of Olympians in public life.

## THE ALLOCATION OF THE OLYMPIC NATIONS PER HISTORICAL PERIOD OF ATHLETES WITH THE ORIGIN OF PELOPONNESE.

The basis of our research for the first part are the catalogs of Olympians by historians of antiquity. Hippie, 4th BC from Helis, Flegon of Tralleis 2nd CE, Julius Africanus 3rd CE, Eusebios of Kaisareia 4th CE who recorded and saved what a significant part of us lists of Olympians of antiquity. Modern historians like Moretti have enriched their inventories with these surveys. According to calculations by Albanides (2004, 2008, 2012), the total number of possible victories at Olympia for the entire history of the festival, should be approximately 4760. Our of 1029 victories (832 victors) constitute less than 22% of that number and should serve as a caution for our research.

As far as the wrestling is concerned, 80 Olympic wins have been recorded by 58 wrestlers, representing 8% of all recorded victories. Of these victories 48 (60%) relate to the success of 33 athletes (57%) from Peloponnese. Eleven at least cities such as ARGOS, AGEIRA, HERAEA, HELIS, TROEZEN, MENALON, FEGALEIA, PELLINI, CORINTH, PATRAI, SPARTA are registered with Olympic champion in wrestling.

**Table 1: List of Olympic victories in wrestling from Peloponnese of Archaic Times (17 of 24 wins - 71%)**

WRESTLING MEN	TOTAL	20
PELOPONNESIANS	14	61 %
CITIES	1	SPARTA

WRESTLING BOYS	TOTAL	4
PELOPONNESIANS	3	75 %
CITIES	2	SPARTA, ARGOS

(Source, Greater Hellenic Foundation, Olympic Games Database ;<http://www.ime.gr/olympics/ancient/gr/db.html>)

During this period, which is little more than two centuries, the dispersion of the origin of the Olympic wrestling winners was limited to only five cities with the city of Sparta having the largest share as 14 in a total of 24 registered victories involve four wrestlers Spartans and 2 of the city of Croton thanks to the emergence of the great *Milon* and the only man who was able to beat him, the fellow citizen *Timasitheo*. Other cities that managed to claim a winner during this period in the sport of wrestling are Akragantas, Argos, and Farsala. The winners are those as we will see later were from very wealthy and politically powerful families of their time, and only towards the end of the period we are considering will be able to show off Olympic champions in wrestling

The reasons which could explain the success of Sparta, is their unique and innovative, for its time, political system, which ensured compulsory and common education to all citizens. The demographic problem forced the Spartans to devise ways to ensure security in the country and the image of the *Lacedaemonians* citizen abroad.

The common compulsory education of the youth of the ruling class in Sparta was imposed in order to strengthen the element of natural selection which was missing because of the small population, and it was this that made the Spartan youth outdistance the young of other cities (especially in the period 720 B.C. to 476 B.C. with over 50% of registered Olympians from Sparta) who may indeed systematically exercised, however individually with different coaching method. The case of the city of Croton is mainly linked to the economic prosperity of the city which mainly flourished in the 5th and 6th century BC, but thanks to the city's intellectual blossoming at that time, led by the great philosopher of antiquity, *Pythagoras*. During this period, the great wrestler *Milon* appeared. There were other athletes who also became the rulers in other sports such as *Astylos* in the running events. This phenomenon of domination of some athletes for many years at the Olympic Games as the Spartans *Hippostheni* and *Etimokli* or the Crotonians *Milon* and *Astylos* indicates the big difference was the very high competitive level within their own city, which made them unbeatable abroad. This phenomenon that mass participation and high level competition within the winner's home country are still the bases for today's champions.

**Table 2: List of Olympic Victories in Wrestling from Peloponnese Classical Times (21/30 wins 70%)**

WRESTLING MEN	TOTAL WINS	23
PELOPONNESIANS	WINS	14 61 %
CITIES		9
<i>ARGOS, HERAEA, HELIS, TROEZEN, MENALON, FEGALEIA, PELLINI, FEGALEIA, PELLINI, CORINTH, PATRAI</i>		
WRESTLING BOYS TOTAL	WINS	17
PELOPONNESIANS	WINS	7 41 %
CITIES		4
<i>ARGOS, HELIS, HERAEA . MEANALO</i>		

(Source: Foundation of Major Hellenism <http://www.ime.gr/olympics/ancient/gr/db.html>)

At first glance this period the distribution of winners in relation to their geographical origin has two main features: the predominance of wrestlers hailing from Peloponnese (which is evident especially in the age of mens this period 15 of 23 victories) and that for the first time we have two winners with origins outside the European continent. Undoubtedly this development played an important role there and raise the status of three other sacred games (Pythian, Nemean and Isthmian) 2 of which were held on the territory of the Peloponnese. Moreover, the supremacy of the Greeks at sea and ashore enabled many island towns and cities located on the outskirts of the Greek world and were under the influence of the Persians and the Carthaginians, prosper and develop further the economy and their communication with their dioceses and other urban centers of the mainland. So immediately after the end of the Persian Wars show winners in the wrestling with originating from Thrace, Samos and Libya.

Unlike the archaic period absent the great powers and the concentration of winners only two cities such as Sparta or Croton (except the athlete *Hearon* from *Pellini* who Defeat in four consecutive Olympiads from 356-344 B.C.), now 22 different cities in the Greek world, represented in the pantheon of the Olympic winners. Although 10 of these cities are located in the Peloponnese, the dispersion of the origin of the other Olympians wrestlers is unprecedented and due to socio- economic developments that followed the Persian Wars to the rise in the higher social strata of cities - states, and new powerful social groups. This dispersion of the winners should not be considered irrelevant by the institution of the *Gymnasiums* and *Ephebion* which already exist although as institutions from the 6th century, but culminates their flourishing in the 5th and 4th centuries. The spread of this institution in all cities of Hellenism and the extension of a lower social classes worked to the benefit of sports not only belong to nobility but to all citizens (Ampanildis, 2004). If we exclude the cities of the Peloponnese which anyway were too close to the sanctuaries, and the places of the contests, the other cities are either coastal or islands. This should not be something unrelated to the growth of trade and navigation, a classic example of this development is the city of Aegina which flourished wrestling in the first half of the 5th century B.C. because in addition to the 4 Olympic champions that brings in less than 40 years the period displays and a host of other wrestlers in sacred Pan-Hellenic games. Indeed it must be a coincidence that Plato was born in Aegina dealt from young to the sport of wrestling.

It also discussed the case of Sparta, which is completely absent from the lists at this time. Probably because of successive military service of young people and the gradual weakening of the political power, Sparta suffered dramatic demographic decline (since the beginning of the 6th century B.C. until the middle of the 4th fell by 9000 thousand *hoplites* to around 1000) which should have played a part in competitive completeness of the wrestlers in contrast to the previous period. It is not excluded that the resounding absence of the Spartans also associated with the same reason for missing the Spartans boxers and pankratiasts from the lists of Olympians and their refusal to *apagorevein* (rule whether direct admission of defeat by the athlete),<sup>4</sup> is probably the period of time allowed to examine and fight some forms of distortion of the limbs. The theory supported by the fact that the athlete *Leontiskos* from Messina became twice Olympic champion in wrestling (456 - 452 B.C.) thanks to the technique of *akrocheirismos* (distortion of the fingers of the hand).

Another fact linking the Olympic victory in the wrestling with the military or the political edge of the city of origin of athlete is in the sole victory of Thebes dating 360 BC the time when the city of Thebes is at the peak of the military hegemony. It is telling that the only *Agenor* is the only one Olympic winner of *Thebes* in wrestling came from *Thespiæ*, and was the son of the ambassador of *Thespians* in the city of *Thebes*. It is worth mentioning here that the only one Olympic victory wrestling for the Athenians dating from 456 B.C. (boys wrestling) a time when Athens is also at a military and diplomatic high point.

Table 3: list of Olympic victories in wrestling from Peloponnese of Hellenistic Period 9 / 16 wins 67 %

WRESTLING MEN	TOTAL WINS	9
PELOPONNESIANS	WINS	6
		61 %
CITIES		ARGOS, HELIS, SPARTA
WRESTLING BOYS		3
PELOPONNESIANS	TOTAL WINS	7
		57 %
CITIES		AGEIRA, HELIS,

(Source: Foundation of Major Hellenism <http://www.ime.gr/olympics/ancient/gr/db.html>)

The list of Olympic champions that period although there is not long but it is exhaustive. There is here too strong presence of Olympic winners hailing the Peloponnese but the new element relating to the Hellenistic era is the appearance in the lists of wrestlers winners hailing Asia and cities of Asia Minor like *Colophon* and the eastern Aegean islands as *Tenedos* and *Rhodes* record Olympic winners in wrestling. Ten to sixteen recorded Olympic victories involving 3 main cities of the Peloponnese Sparta, Argos and Helis, and the islands of the eastern Aegean Rhodes and Tenedos enter the pantheon of cities with Olympic victory. The fact that the lists that time period could be considered not to be objective since they have a lot of time gaps with respect to the previous ones. That which, however, is apparent is the absence of the other Greek cities of both mainland and Magna Greece, which would have linked the loss of political and economic force and the occupation of the cities of Southern Italy and Sicily by the Romans. The exception is *Helis* which displays currently six winners and this may be explained in various ways such as the historical connection of *Helis* with the sanctuary of Olympia, the sports infrastructure in the city of Ancient *Helis*, and obviously ease the transition in place of the games .

During this period, the institution of the Gymnasium and the Palaestra knows most of the acme and in addition to geographical expansion in all the Greek cities of Asia are now in economic boom, but now for the first time young with a barbarian origin may be attending such schools . Indeed, according to data may take part in competitions such as the city *Gorgippia* at north of Black Sea where they were found the oldest inscriptions mention wrestling winners names barbarian origin to the sacred games *Hermaea* (Ampanildis, 2004).

### Why the Peloponnese ?

- *The Peloponnese is the field of action of the main Myths of Ancient Greek Culture (Zeus, Hercules, Theseus, Perseus, etc.)*
- *In the Peloponnese, Argos is the capital of Mycenaean civilization leader of the Pre –historic Greek world.*
- *In the Peloponnese is the city of Sparta, which played a leading role in political developments in Greece from the 9th till the 4th century BC.*
- *In the Peloponnese there are 3 of the 4 Panhellenic Sacred Athletic Games Olympia, Nemea, Isthmian.*
- *Easy access and low cost travel to the place of the competitions*

## SOCIAL STATUS OF THE TOP WRESTLERS IN ANCIENT GREEK WORLD

Wrestlers in antiquity is extremely popular persons with a strong social presence and more often with the noble origin came from wealthy families just like most Olympians of their time. The capture of the Olympians by the most famous and costly artists of their time shows the economic prestige of their family or the importance of their success for their city of origin.

Studying the victory celebration hymns of Pindar and *Bacchylides* realize that they refer to noble and obviously wealthy athletes of their time. The time lived Pindar is a transition - for the regime - period. It is the time when the political arena the oligarchs and aristocrats lose their political influence while gaining democratic ideas. The world of sport will not remain unaffected. The playing arena entering young men with new approaches, mainly based on their economic area and not because of their noble origin. Pindar says, that gymnasts like Melisias, who very early trained young people for the victory and criticized for this, as young people leave unprepared for other offices (Kyle, 1993). Pindar is one of the leading writers of classical times, readers and obviously customers, for whom he wrote custom hymns of all of them come from the upper classes and wealthy families. The fact that the Melisias criticized by contemporaries because trains young unilaterally brings fear certain circles for the loss of tradition that wants eminent athletes are descendants of aristocratic families and be able to handle public issues. Substance not criticized the Melisias, for the methodology followed in the education of young people, but, highlighting the risk to break the public life of branded athletes after the end of their sporting career. With time from the 7th to the 5th century BC interdependence sport and political leadership changed and eventually collapsed.

Plato also In *Laws* stated in competitive sports and recognizes that professionalism is inevitable, suggesting that in his time there are professional athletes and that he had personal knowledge of the complexity of the sport and the high competitive level and Sacred Games as the Pythia and the Olympia *if someone seeks to highlight the winner in Pythia or in Olympia, the effort will not allow him to deal with other projects* (Plato, *Laws* Z 807). In same spirit was Alexander the Great declared one century later that only if Kings competed, he would participate (Plutarch, *Alexander* 4.10)

To the Aristocracy of Athens direct participation in competitions was aligned with the political progress, however, although the period of democracy and imperial times the uniqueness of benevolence changed, remained politically powerful among citizens (Kyle, 1993). Studying the victory celebration hymns of *Pindar* and *Bacchylides* referring to victories of wrestlers we understand how important was the role of the father and the family contribution to the success of the honored athlete (Howie, 2012).

Through their lyrics, derive information that highlight features of the family as the winner, the noble, or the heroic their origin, economic family area, the particular religious preferences in relation to the nationwide local deities, and even the social contribution of their ancestors.

### TEN REPRESENTATIVE WRESTLERS

#### **624 BC - 608 BC Sparta (Peloponnese) Ipposthenis**

So much importance seems to have been the victories *Ipposthenis* that the Spartans honored him by building the temple, and honoring him after oracle as god Poseidon. But for his son *Etoimokli*, with a win less than his father erected a statue near the temple of Argive Hera *On the way to the right of the hill is a statue of Etoimokli. The Etoimoklis and his father Ipposthenis, won in wrestling and the two together eleven times. The Ipposthenis overcame his son in a victory* (Pausanias, *Lakonika* 13, 9)

#### **532 BC - 516 BC Croton (southern Italy) Milon**

The philosopher Pythagoras, despite all its professed distaste for wrestling backed off from this position when he came in contact with the presumed greatest wrestler of his time, Milon, who stated that he left writings. According to M. Poliakoff who comment on the social status of Milon, and judging from the fact that accepted (and even for a fee) to groom even a famous doctor of his time, the Dimokeidis questions the noble ancestry, but social action, however, and obviously the great sporting fame helped him, to be accepted by the aristocratic elite of his time. Indeed, during a symposium of the Pythagoreans in which he was present himself Pythagoras an earthquake happened, and the building began to crumble, Milon then grabbed the pole that supported the roof of the building thus saving his comrades, and to prevent himself to escape (Strabo, *Geography* 6, 1, 12) Besides Pythagoras died in a fire at his home Milon, which reinforces the view that Milon was associated directly with the Pythagoreans who constituted an integral part of the oligarchic government of Croton (Poliakoff, 1987) But the action of Milon expanded in the political arena, in a conflict the city of Croton in the neighboring city of Sybaris, which moved threateningly against them, the citizens of Croton led by Milon, who as another Hercules

holding bat, wreathed and a lion skin on his shoulders encouraged much less fellow, who finally diverted to flee the Sybaritians causing several casualties (Gialouris 2003). Philostratus says the statue of Milo's of Croton brought to the hand grenades, and justifies the fact that the athlete was priest of Hera (Philostratus, *Life of Apollo Tyaney*s 4, 28). So if this claim of Philostratus is valid then it becomes clear that Milo was not only a great form of sport of the time but a multifaceted personality with substantial involvement in the political, spiritual, and religious life of the city.

#### **496 BC Agrigento (Sicily)Empedocles**

Diogenes Laertius referring to the philosopher *Empedocles* from Agrigento, notes the victories of his grandfather in equestrian events (*Keli*) and father of Empedocles, in the wrestling, in the same competitions at the Olympics of 496 BC (Diogenes Laertius, *Empedocles* 8. 53). Participation solely in equestrian events at Olympia, and evolution of the son Empedocles one of the most important philosophers of his time testify that the family belonged to the economic and intellectual elite that period.

#### **484 BC Farsala (Thessaly) Telemachus**

Another typical case testifies to the noble origin of the Olympic winners of the Archaic period is Telemachus athlete from Farsala winner in men's wrestling at Olympia in 484 BC . Telemachus and his brother Agias were grandchildrens of Thessalians leader Daochos A' and emerged at the same Olympics. From inscriptions found in Farsala informed that both the Agias as Telemachus were *periodonikes* in pankration and wrestling respectively. Statue found in Farsala, carved by sculptor Lysippos Sikyonio

#### **460 BC (Aegina ) Alkimedon**

For *Alkimedonta* the winner of Aegina in wrestling boys at Olympia in 460 BC. Almost contemporary of the great philosopher Plato, a young man of aristocratic origin and athletic tradition, was born and lived for decades before the great philosopher at Aegina who at that time knew financial prosperity. Alkimedon was a student of the most paid coach of the era, Melissa, who criticized his practices in training and preparing young wrestlers... (Pindar, Olympian)

#### **440 BC - 436 BC Heraea (Peloponnese) Theopompos B**

*Theopompus B'* from Heraia, who came from Olympic family and defeat in 440 BC and 436 BC in wrestling such as his father Theopompus, and his grandfather Damaretos, who was also Olympic winners in pentathlon and *hoplitodromia* respectively.

#### **436 BC Helis (Peloponnese) Pantarkis**

*Pantarkis* an adolescent from Elis who win the boys wrestling at the 86th Olympiad (ie. The 436 BC) according to Pausanias was a lover of Phidias, and that one of the sculptures at the base of the throne of Zeus which depicting young athlete tying ribbon in front, looking like the *Pantarki*. If the information Pausanias stand up then we can assume that *Pantarkis* regardless of social status of the family, belonged to the he inner circle of a great personality of his time as Phidias.

*"Between the legs of the throne, are four brackets, which extends from one foot to another. In the bracket opposite the entrance there are seven statues, but nobody knows how the eighth disappeared. We represent ancient events because in the age of Phidias the sport of pankration boys had not yet institutionalized. They say that he who tied the ribbon around his head resembles Pantarki, one Helean adolescent, lover of Phidias Pantarkis had won the boys wrestling in the eighty-sixth Olympiad ... "* (Pausanias, *Heleiaka* A 11, 3) and *"... after Ikkos is Heleios Pantarkis wrestling champion boys whom he had fallen in love Phidias ...."* (Pausanias, *Heleiaka* B 10)

#### **360 BC Thebes (central Greece) Agenor**

The case of *Agenor* of Thebes defeated in wrestling in 360 BC the statue erected at Olympia was common expense of Phocians and the Thebans because the athlete's father was a diplomat and ambassador of Fokeans in Thebes. *The statue is public tribute of Phocians, because his father Theopompus was consul of Phocians Thebe* (Pausanias, *Heleiaka* B 6, 2)

#### **356 BC - 344 BC Pellini (Peloponnese) Chaeron**

Pausanias mentions the great wrestler *Chaeron* from Pellini who won twice at Isthmia, and 4 in Olympia 356-344 BC that *citizens have neither indicated the name because he overturned the constitution and accepted by Alexander the Great in more costly gift, it's become a tyrant in the father's land.* (Pausanias, 7. 27). Poliakoff (1987) says that Chearon that there was Plato's pupil, and as most students came from upper class.

#### **332 BC - 328 BC Patra (Peloponnese) Cheilon**

The Achaean *Cheilon* wrestler winner in Pythian, Isthmian, Nemean, and two-time in Olympian, (332 BC and 328 BC) who was the hero of war and was killed in battle, and the Achaeans buried with public expenditure. The epigram read Pausanias says the following: *...In wrestling I'm the only one who won twice in Olympia, two in the Pythian, in Nemean three, and four in the coastal Isthmus, the Cheilonas me son Cheilona from Patra, that the people of the Achaeans for bravery honored by burial, when he was killed in the war ....* Pausanias calculates considering the age and activity of Lysippos, (the most famous sculptor of the time and favorite artist of Alexander the Great) who created the statue of Cheilona that probably fell in the battle of Chaeronea. (Pausanias, *Heleiaika* B 4, 6-7)

#### **240 BC Helis (Peloponnese) Evanoridas**

The Elian *Evanoridas* winner in boys wrestling in 240 BC later became *hellanodikis* and on his own initiative engraved the names of the winners in Olympia *when was hellanodikis engraved the names of the winners in Olympia*. (Pausanias, *Heleiaika* B 8, 1)

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

The top wrestlers of the archaic period have origin from noble and aristocratic families as do the athletes of other disciplines. Over the years the Holy Grail of Olympians and other Sacred Games opens and youth of other social classes apparently the most affluent. Until the beginning of the Hellenistic period and later Roman dominated professional athletes the pantheon of Olympians and other *Panhellenic* winners - as reflected by the various references made by historians and lyric poets - composed of young people: *noble even divine origin, descendants of the wealthy and powerful families, descendants of families with athletic tradition, associated with the priesthood, from families of Hellanodikai or made themselves Hellanodikes, related to the diplomatic, political and artistic elite of their time*. From all this we can conclude that this person is in the public life and develop strong social action.

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