

A Prearranged Affair. Towards Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 5209

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Abstract

The newly published volume of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri (LXXIX, 2014) contains a remarkable document (no. 5209), a contract made in 267 AD which seals an agreement between two wrestlers in the age class of youth to cede the victory to one of them during a forthcoming agon in Middle Egypt. This agreement to cede was made against a sum of 3,800 drachmas in old currency (i.e. the equivalent of a donkey). This document represents a perfect confirmation of the literary tradition concerning corruption in ancient Greek sport, mainly reported by Pausanias (V 21, 2-18) and Philostratus (De gymnastica 45). Philostratus observed that it is interesting to see that the written contract was concluded between the ambitious father of one of the athletes and obviously two trainers of the other one, who generally made negotiations to the 'sporting' disadvantage of their pupils. This could be the reason why they are substituted by a third person. The document's significance for the history of sport cannot be overestimated.

Keywords

Sport in antiquity, Roman Egypt, corruption youth athletes, wrestling

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The long history of sport in antiquity was not always of the kind that would automatically make the ancient phenomenon a model for sport in modern times. Looking at the social estimation of victory in sport, especially by the aristocracy, it is understandable that it also had its shady side¹. This is clearly visible in the history of the Olympic Games, where the victor could gain the greatest honour attainable by victory in competition. In this context, it can be understood what Pindar is saying with the following words:

*But, if you will tell of prizes in contest, my heart, then do not seek beside the sun in the solitary wide heaven another star which its light at day would spread brighter; of a more splendid contest than at Olympia we cannot sing!*²

Seven hundred years later, Pausanias (V 21, 2-18)³, who visited Olympia around 175 AD⁴, impressively compiled in his *chronique scandaleuse* the examples of corruption and cheating which were known of up until his time.

The *chronique scandaleuse* at Olympia

One of the earliest cases of sporting corruption that is already known of occurred in the late classical epoch, in 388 BC –200 years after the reorganization of the Olympic Games⁵. The boxer Eupolos of Thessaly bribed three of his opponents, one of them Phormion from Halikarnassos in Asia Minor, an actual Olympic victor of this discipline, to cede to him the victory. He and his accomplices were punished in the draconian way; they had to erect six bronze statues of Zeus⁶, so-called *zanes*⁷. The result of this measure was limited because less than two generations later the Athenian pentathlete Kallippos likewise tried to buy victory. He and his bribed adversaries had to pay once more for six statues of Zeus, exceeding his financial abilities. Even his native town, which would have been obliged to pay instead of its citizen in such a case, refused to pay the enormous sum. Athens, consequently,

1 Decker, 2004; Weiler, 2014.

2 Pindar's verses in Ol. I 3-8 are not to be understood only as a poetical construct. Pindar's poetry and its ancient reception are covered in the collected edition of Hornblower/Morgan (eds.) 2007.

3 Text and translation by Mauritsch/Petermandi/Pleket/Weiler 2012, Q181. Further translations: Miller 1991, doc. 75 (V 21, 2-4); Decker 2012, doc. 31 (V 21, 12-16, 18); Commentaries: Ebert 1980, 71-72; Decker 2004, 230-234; Kyle 2007, 131-132; Weiler 2014, 5-7.

4 For the time of the travels and the record of Pausanias' text see in general Habicht 1985, 21-35; for Pausanias and Olympia see Trendelenburg 1914.

5 The year 776 BC already in antiquity calculated as the beginning of the agon at Olympia today is doubted by strong arguments: Christensen 2007; Kyrieleis 2011, 132-133. Lee 2001 is for instance still an advocate for this date.

6 It is possible to estimate the amount of the fine in comparing the fact that a bronze statue in antiquity was equal to 10 annual salaries of a craftsman, cf. Herrmann 1989, 127 and note 30.

7 For the *zanes* on principle see Herrmann 1974.

threatened to boycott the Olympic Games in the then future. Only the announcement of the Delphic oracle, not to have taken into account any inquiry of Athens, could break the obstinacy/rigidity of the city⁸. As it seems, Elis with this hard punishment went too far. In the second century BC, the two wrestlers Eudelos and Philostratos, both from Rhodos, were condemned by reason of their arrangement to erect two statues. The same degree of punishment was commanded when, during the 192nd Olympic Games in 12 BC, the fathers of two wrestlers of the youth class, Damonikos from Elis and Sosandros from Smyrna, made an arrangement that was later detected. The critic of Pausanias stresses that a citizen of Elis, the organizing city of the Olympic Games, was involved in this case of corruption; beyond this, he was even the main protagonist. One of the two statues, as the usual degree of punishment in the Roman imperial period, was erected in the gymnasium of Elis, while the other one, as was customary, at the entrance of the Olympic stadium. It was here, where the last two statues were also situated as a final warning to athletes against committing such offences before entering the arena. These were imposed on the boxers Deidas and Sarapammon, both coming from the Arsinoitic home of Egypt. Their occurrence of corruption took place during the 226th Olympic Games in 125 AD when Sarapammon promised a payment should his opponent cede victory to him⁹.

It seems that the pancratist Sarapion from Alexandria had to erect one statue of Zeus as punishment for his demonstrated cowardice when he ran away from his opponent during the 201st Olympic festival in 25 AD. The boxer Apollonios from Alexandria had to pay a fine when he arrived too late in Elis, where there was a fixed time prescribed of 30 days for training before the competition. Additionally, he assaulted the boxer Herakleides, also from Alexandria, who was proclaimed victor without combat. Probably, the fine on Sarapion was used to erect another statue of the god. In summary, the chronicle scandaleuse of Olympia counts altogether 19 zanes¹⁰.

⁸ Weiler, 1991.

⁹ Cf. Decker 2012, doc. 31.

¹⁰ It must be stressed that despite the long report on cases of corruption at the centre of Greek athletics by Pausanias being a negative chronicle of ancient sport, there is one contrary example showing the resistance of a young boxer against an attempt of bribery. The Milesian Antipatros, son of Kleinopatros and Olympic victor, rejected the offer of the Sicilian tyrant Dionysios who wanted/preferred to receive him as a citizen of Syracuse (Pausanias VI 2, 6).

The *chronique scandaleuse* at Olympia

The only treatise on sport of antiquity preserved in its complete form is the text of Philostratus, author of the so-called Second Sophistics, with the title “Gymnasticus”¹¹. The document treats different focal points in its 58 chapters. After the definition of the term *gymnastic*, it deals with the disciplines of competitions and their origins and history, especially in relation to Olympia. Then the ideal coach (*gymnast*) is defined. One of his special fields of knowledge was that of the inspection of athletes relating to their specific capabilities and qualification requirements. When evaluating the topic of training, a confrontation arises between that of the implemented natural training of former times and the degenerated contemporary training, which the modern method of the tetrads (space of four days) resulted in deteriorating performance. Philostratus stipulated by this that it was consequently easy, at the time, to buy one’s victory:

*There are laws against temple robbers who mutilate or destroy a silver or gold dedication to the gods, but the crown of Apollo or of Poseidon, for which even the gods once competed, they are free to buy and free to sell.*¹²

The following passage reports a case of corruption having the full indignation of the author:

Let me give one of many possible examples which will illustrate what happens at the other games. A boy won the pale [wrestling] at Isthmia by promising to pay 66.000 \$ [original: 3,000 drachmas] to his opponent. When they went into the gymnasium on the next day, the loser demanded his money, but the winner said that he owed nothing since the other had tried after all to win. Since their differences were not resolved, they had recourse to an oath and went into the sanctuary at Isthmia. The loser then swore in public that he had sold Poseidon’s contest, and that they had agreed upon a price 66.000 \$ [original: 3,000 drachmas]. Moreover, he stated this in a clear voice with no trace of embarrassment. The fact that this was told in front of witnesses may make it more truthful, but also all the more sacrilegious and infamous; he swore such an oath at Isthmia before the eyes of Greece. What disgraces may also be occurring at the games in Ionia and Asia?¹³

This date of this corruption is not exactly know, but one can make

11 The leading edition is always the one of Jünthner 1969. For the last longer comments on the dissertation see König 2005, 301-344; Brodersen 2015.

12 Philostratus, De gymnastica 45 (Jüthner 172, 5-17; translation Miller 1991, doc. 154). The exception of Olympia means that the violations of the rules at least were punished in the contrary to the other places of athletic competitions. Even at Olympia such cases existed as the *chronique scandaleuse* compiled by Pausanias proves.

13 Philostratus, De gymnastica 45 (Jüthner 172, 5-17; translation Miller 1991, doc. 154). The mentioned passages were commented by Weiler 2014, 2-4.

the assumption that it happened not long before the composition of the text “Gymnasticus” by Philostratus, which was completed between 220 and 240 AD¹⁴. The situation is quite clear: During the Isthmian Games held in the sanctuary of Poseidon at the Isthmus of Corinth, a competitor of the youngest age class was corrupted by a sum of 3,000 drachmas to cede to his opponent the victory. This ‘boy’ of at least 17 years¹⁵ was not yet versed in the ways of business, meaning that the contract had to have been created by adults. This circumstance is not reported by Philostratus but is quite obvious. Although a discipline is not mentioned, such a situation can only relate to a contest in combat sports. The agreement only makes sense between wrestlers, boxers or pancratists because in the other disciplines of Greek *agones* there were too many participants to be certain that such a contract would work. The persons which we can take into consideration are an ambitious father like the Elean Damonikos (Pausanias V 21, 16 sq., see above) or the trainers of athletes who would advise their pupils to participate in bribery. For such, they would loan their athletes money against high interests and together would bear a great deal of guilt for the moral decline of contemporary sport¹⁶.

As can be seen from the above, the bribed athlete on the day after the contest, when both met in the *gymnasium*, claimed his money, but the ‘victorious’ athlete tried to wriggle his way out of the contract. He made this attempt through the claim that his ‘victory’ happened despite the will of his bribed opponent. In other words, he was able to easily overpower his opponent regardless of whether he attempted to win or not. Saying this, he caused the noisy protest of the bribed athlete, who, in the sanctuary of Poseidon, publicly confirmed by oath the agreement. If such scandals occurred under the agenda of Old Hellas, so Philostratus, what was the, then, unfolding situation in Asia Minor and its Hinterland where Greek athletics also had a long tradition.

14 Cf. König 2007, 301 note 2.

15 At the *Isthmia* three age classes were participating: the ‘boys’ (until 17 years old); the ‘beardless’ (until 20 years old) and the ‘men’ (over 20 years old); for the age classes in general see Crowther 1988; Petermandl 1997

16 Philostratus, *De gymnastica* 45 (Jüthner 172, 15-24). The demands of the trainers are even higher than the proverbially high interests in see trade where the risks to lose the invested capital were extremely high.

A written contract on corruption in wrestling (Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 5209)

What has been detected concerning corrupt affairs, as can be seen from the handed down preceding literary sources (especially by the example reported by Philostratus), has now been brilliantly confirmed by a papyrus found at Oxyrhynchus in Middle Egypt: A place famous for its profusion of such documents that have been well preserved due to the dry climate of the desert. The newly published volume LXXIX of the series *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (devoted to the presentation of unpublished agonistic papyri and comparable documents) contains the edition of a document (no. 5209) which represents a contract about the cession of a sporting victory between two athletes¹⁷. The document (14 x 17,3 cm) is very well preserved and easily readable. It contains 25 lines of text and is dated February 23rd in 267 AD, when Gallienus was an autocrat¹⁸.

Aurelius Aquila alias Sara[p – patronymic, high] priest of the splendid city of the Antinoites, [and however I am styled], to Marcus Aurelius Lucam[mon patronymic of the Hadr[ianic tribe and Olympian deme, and to Gaius][ulius Theon(?) through Marcus] Aurelius Serenus and however he [is styled, of Oxyrhynchus(?) city,] both of them guarantors of A[urelius Demetrius . . .] wrestler, greeting.

Since he has agreed with [my son Aure]lius Nicantinous – (he being) [Aurelius] Demetrius who has had himself guaranteed by you – when competing in the competition for the boy [wrestlers], to fall three times and yield, [. . .] receiving through you three thousand eight hundred drachmas of silver of old coinage free of risk, on condition that if – may it not happen – although he yields and does not [fail his part?], the crown is reserved as sacred, (we) are not to institute proceedings against him about these things, but if Demetrius himself contravenes any of the written terms and those he has agreed with my same son, likewise you are of necessity to pay as penalty to my [same] son on account of wrongdoing three talents of silver of old coinage without any delay or inventive argument, according to the law of guarantee, because of the fact that we have made a contract on these terms.

The agreement is binding, being written in two duplicate copies, of which I have a single one and you a single one, and when formally asked I agreed.

*Year 14 of Imperator Caesar Publius Licinius Gallienus, Germanicus Maximus, Persicus Maximus, Pius Felix Augustus, Mecheir 29.*¹⁹

17 Henry/Parsons et alii 2014, 163-167 (D.W. Rathbone).

18 For the situation of the sport in the time of this emperor see Wallner 1997, 173-189.

19 Henry/Parsons et alii 2014, p. 166 (D.W. Rathbone).

Although the text is not composed by a scribe trained in drafting contracts²⁰, the agreement is clear: Two wrestlers of the age class of youth (named by the term 'boy'), Nicantinous and Demetrius, agreed to a competition that the latter would lose. Further, the text specified the manner in which the combat would be lost, whereby the latter (boy) would fall down three times or by giving up respectively and thus cede the victory to Nicantinous for a sum of 3,800 drachmas of old currency. This sum corresponds to the equivalent of a donkey²¹. As it appears, the combat specified within the contract is of a local *agon* and the relatively low offer can be understood on the grounds that the competition did not concern adult men. Further, should the umpires have made a decision to end the contest in a draw (what a god may prevent), nevertheless, the sum should still have been paid. In case the bribed Demetrius forgot his role and acted contrary to the contract, he would have been made to pay a fine of 18,000 drachmas, nearly five times the sum he was to gain by respecting the rules of the agreement. Because the 'boys' (at most 17 years old) are not yet of an age that could make such transactions on their own, the contract is signed by the ambitious father of Nicantinous²², Aurelius Aquila Sarap - , high priest of Antinoe, on the one side and two guarantors of Demetrius, represented by a third person Marcus Aurelius Serenus, on the other side. One has to assume that these two guarantors were trainers, especially since a certain Gaius Julius Theon from the same period of the contract – exactly in 173 AD – is known as a triple victor of the (local?) Capitoleia and high priest of the local branch of the international athletes' association²³. This is a clear confirmation of what Philostratus wrote about the trainers and their role in mediating the selling of victories in contests. Probably, their bad reputation is the reason why they are substituted by a third person, neutralizing this blemish. The bribed athlete has only to fall three times to the ground, as was the final decision in an ancient Greek wrestling match²⁴. If the bribed athlete did not act in agreement with the contract and strove for victory, the

20 Henry/Parsons et alii 2014, p. 163 (D.W. Rathbone).

21 Henry/Parsons et alii 2014, p. 164 (D.W. Rathbone).

22 It was also the fathers, Damonikos of Elis and Sosandros of Smyrna who were behind the deal concerning the wrestling match between their sons at Olympia, as Pausanias reports (Pausanias VI 21, 16-17, vide supra).

23 Cf. Frisch 1986, doc. 8.

24 For this central rule of wrestling see Rudolph 1965, 29 sq.; Miller 2004, 50 sq. For wrestling in general see Poliakoff 1982; Poliakoff 1987; Doblhofer/Petermandl/Schachinger 1998. Athletes who corresponding to this rule had gained victories without being thrown (thus 3:0) often stressed this circumstance in their inscriptions using the term 'unthrown' taken from the special agonistic terminology, see for examples Ebert 1972, no. 32, 2; 63, 3; 65, 4; 67, 6; 72, 2; 73 A, 3. See too Poliakoff 1982, Index p.200. – For the arrangement of the two Egyptian wrestlers it would have been clever to produce a result 3:2 such a triumph evoking the slightest suspicion of irregularity.

guarantors, respectively their representatives, would have had to pay a fine of 18,000 drachmas. Every party to the agreement maintained an identical version of the written contract and its validity is confirmed by a flourish of a judicial formulation. At the end of the papyrus, the date is given, transformed in the Christian era to 23rd February 267.

This document, a contract stipulating the intention to undertake corrupt practices by a young athlete participating in a contest in a Middle Egyptian city, is irrefutable evidence that the abuse of selling and buying sporting victories reported by some ancient authors is not a simple product of their phantasy. Rather, it demonstrates that this was the reality of the times. Papyrological sources were immediately transcribed, from real life occurrences, and do not demonstrate the same tendencies of possible misconstruances as found in the literary tradition and even in some inscriptions when a palliation of the reality is intended.

Taking into consideration the cultural context of the document, the corruption of a rival can only mean that the active partner of the contract, respectively the ambitious father, tried to neutralize the main rival of his son. This attempt was made for a forthcoming *agon* in his city or in his neighbourhood²⁵ in such a way that the favored could, unhindered, seize his chance for victory. During the Greek-Roman period, it was expected that there were a lot of participants in such *agones* in the chora, as is known from a list of athletes for an event in a city of Middle Egypt of the same era that contained some running disciplines²⁶. Thus, in the case of the contract, we may trust that, beside the two partners specified within the arrangement, there were further entries. For combat sports, in the example here wrestling, it can be assumed that the number of entries were fewer than in the running events, where for instance the athletes could participate in the stadium and run (sprint) to the capabilities of their natural talents. This was not the case in combat sports as the competing athletes' potential for victory was dictated rather by hard training for endurance and technique. Additionally, it appears from the available sources that the potential competitors in wrestling of the youth class in the region were known for their efficiency. Should these competitors have been 'weaker' than both of the athletes in the contract, then one can deduce that it would have been superfluous to bribe further aspirants to secure victory. It cannot be excluded that

²⁵ Henry/Parsons 2014, 163 (Rathbone) the Great Antinoeia of Antinoupolis are considered as probable context of the bribery Aquila and Loukammon coming from this city, cf. Remijssen 2014, 193.

²⁶ Decker, 2010.

the ambitious father Aquila, whose aspiration was unequivocally the victory of his son, bribed other wrestlers of the youth class, who may have been favored to win, without preservation of the corresponding documents.

But, the best opportunity for the act of corruption was, without doubt, the day when all participants of the wrestling contest were present. This was the day of the event if there was no rule, as in Olympia for the Olympic Games or in Neapolis for the Sebasta, where the athletes ought to be present 30 days before the competition²⁷. In any case, an attempt of bribery would have made most sense at a time when all participants were entered. The notion that Nicantinous and Demetrius were the sole athletes of the wrestling of the youth class at the agon can be excluded. At any rate, the best opportunity for such corruption to take place would have been during the moment when the two finalists were revealed, following the elimination rounds by the k.o. system²⁸. After this revelation, there would have not been a great deal of time to act because the final in the combat sports seemingly took place on the same day. This is known from our understandings of the competitions at Olympia, whereby wrestling, boxing and pancratium came to an end over the course of a single afternoon²⁹. Even if time was short, it would have still been possible, however, for the initiator of the corruption, with his accomplices and the scribe to compose the contract, based on there being a longer interval before the final.

27 Philostratus, VA 5, 43 (Olympic Games); Mauritsch/Petermandl/Pleket/Weiler 2012, Q28 (Sebasta). We must not expect such a rule concerning a relative insignificant *agon*. The early presence at the place of the competition was only prescribed for those of the first category as were the *agones* of the old and new *periods*.

28 That was seen already by the editor of the papyrus: Henry/Parsons 2014, 163 (Rathbone): "... the contract ... concerns the final match of the boy's wrestling ..."

29 For the period later than 468 BC this program was realized on day 4, since the first century AD probably on day 5 of the Olympics, cf. Lee 2001, 102-103.

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