

The killing of an athlete in a combat sport during athletic competition presented a problematic situation to ancient Greek society. On the one hand, an unnatural death required legal inquiries and proceedings to assess blame and damages. On the other, athletes who demonstrated such a degree of power and might that they could kill an opponent with their bare hands deserved recognition and acclamation as successors to the heroic tradition. Paradoxically, these powerful athletes posed a threat to the social order of ancient Greece yet deserved honors for their heroic victories. This legal quandary epitomizes the tension in Classical Greece between the individual as aspirant to heroic status, and the individual as adherent to the norms that sustained the community. In an effort to negotiate this predicament, ancient Athenian laws specifically addressed involuntary athletic manslaughter, and pan-hellenic judges employed legalistic technicalities to disqualify powerful but murderous athletes from receiving the fruits of their victories.

According to Aristotle and Demosthenes, Athenian law judged killing in athletic competition to be legal and did not require the killer to go into exile. (Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 57.3; Demosthenes 23.53). In addition, Plato's *Laws* considers athletic competition to be a mitigating factor in cases of manslaughter (865a). Each of these, however, assumes that the athlete killed his opponent involuntarily (ἄκων). Despite this legal assumption of unwillingness, killer athletes seemed quite willing to mete out death to their opponents, since it resonated with the ethos of athletic prowess among the heroes of myth. Like Heracles, Theseus, and Polydeuces, they wrestled or boxed their opponents to death. Pausanias recorded the stories of Damonexos and Kleomedes, two boxers who killed their opponents in pan-hellenic competition. In addition, in an inscription found at Delphi, a Thessalian athlete named Telemachus boasted that he had killed a Tyrrhenian opponent (first published by Homolle in *BCH* 21).

Paradoxically, these killer athletes transgressed social boundaries but deserved praise and honor for their prowess. Leslie Kurke has eloquently explained the powerful and dangerous status enjoyed by an athletic victor, the process by which the victor could be safely reintegrated into society, and the mayhem which could ensue if the victor was dishonored. In addition, Mark Munn has discussed the tendency for powerful mortals, such as Olympic victors, to challenge and push the boundaries between the mortal and divine spheres. These cases of athletic manslaughter provide additional insights into the uneasy and ambiguous relationships between powerful victorious athletes and ancient Greek social order, and the ways in which ancient Greek society sought to negotiate these relationships.

According to Pausanias, the judges disqualified Damonexos on a technicality, effectively avoiding the social taboo of rewarding a killer. Similarly, the Olympic judges stripped Kleomedes of his victory, but tragedy ensued. In a fit of madness, the dishonored athlete killed a school full of children. In recognition of this manifestation of heroic power, the Oracle at Delphi proclaimed Kleomedes a hero. At Delphi, the inscription of Telemachus boasted of killing an opponent, but was careful to announce that the opponent was "willing," effectively defusing any legal consequences for murder or manslaughter. As powerful athletes imitated their mythic forebears, the killing of an opponent presented a conflict between recognizing individual heroic might and preserving social order. These three examples indicate both this tension and ancient Greek strategies for negotiating this dilemma.