

## UNDERSTANDING ANCIENT COMBATIVES: THE “HEEL MANOEUVRE” IN PHILOSTRATUS’ *HEROICUS* 14.4 – 15.3.

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The above-cited passage — in the form of a dialogue between the Vinedresser and the Phoenician — reads as follows:<sup>1</sup>

- Α. . . . τὸν Κίλικα, οἶμαι, παγκρατιαστὴν ἀκούεις, ὃν Ἀλτῆρα ἐκάλουν οἱ πατέρες, ὡς μικρὸς ἦν καὶ τῶν ἀντιπάλων παρὰ πολὺ.
- Φ. Οἶδα τεκμαιρόμενος δῆπου τοῖς ἀνδριάσι· χαλκοῦς γὰρ πολλαχοῦ ἔστηκε.
- Α. Τούτῳ ξένη, περιὴν μὲν καὶ ἐπιστήμη, περιὴν δὲ καὶ θυμοῦ, καὶ μάλα ἔρρώννυ αὐτὸν ἢ εὐαρμοστία τοῦ σώματος. ἀφικόμενος οὖν ἐς τὸ ἱερόν τοῦτο ὁ παῖς (ἔπλει δὲ εὐθὺ Δελφῶν ἀγωνιούμενος τὴν κρίσιν) ἠρώτα τὸν Πρωτεσίλεων, ὃ τι πράττων περιέσοιτο τῶν ἀντιπάλων· ὁ δὲ «πατούμενος» ἔφη. ἀθυμία οὖν αὐτίκα τὸν ἀθλητὴν ἔσχεν ὡς καταβεβλημένον ὑπὸ τοῦ χρησμοῦ· τὸ δ’ ἀποπτερνίζειν ἐν ἀγωνίᾳ πρῶτος εὐρὼν ξυνήκεν ὕστερον ὅτι κελεύει αὐτὸν μὴ μεθισθαι τοῦ ποδός· τὸν γὰρ προσπαλαίοντα τῇ πτέρνῃ πατεῖσθαι τε ξυνεχῶς χρῆ καὶ ὑποκεῖσθαι τῷ ἀντιπάλῳ. καὶ τοῦτο πράττων ὁ ἀθλητὴς οὗτος ὀνόματος λαμπροῦ ἔτυχε καὶ ἠττήθη οὐδενός.
- V. For example, you have heard, I think, of the Cilician pancratic athlete, whom our fathers called “Halter”,<sup>2</sup> how small he was, indeed much smaller than his opponents.
- PH. I certainly am aware of him, in view of his statues, for bronze ones stand in many places.
- V. He possessed excellence in skill and courage, and harmony of body made him very strong. When the young man arrived at this sanctuary (he sailed directly to Delphi for the trial of strength) he asked Protesilaos how he might overcome his rivals. He said, “By being trampled upon”. Faintheartedness immediately seized the athlete, as if he had been struck down by the oracle. After he first discovered the

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<sup>1</sup> Greek text (Lannoy edition) and English translation both from Maclean and Aitken 2001:40–43; cf. Grossardt’s later German translation 2006a:195 and detailed commentary 2006b:426–428.

<sup>2</sup> The pankratiast’s nickname — Ἀλτῆρ — literally refers to a kind of hand-held weight swung in pairs by distance jumpers to generate momentum.

heel maneuver during a contest, he later realized that the oracle ordered him not to let go of his opponent's foot. For the one who wrestles with the heel must be trampled upon repeatedly and lie under his opponent. By doing so, the athlete gained an illustrious name for himself and was defeated by no one.

In spite of the fact that this “heel manoeuvre” enabled an undersized pankratiast to go undefeated in competition, no one seems to know exactly how the technique was executed. Although Gardiner was of the opinion that the “heel-trick” was a well known jujutsu foot lock that enabled one to throw and then submit the opponent, he didn't go into any detail or provide any references to back his assertion.<sup>3</sup> Proceeding on clues provided in the text and on insights provided by the revival of the pankration in the form of modern-day mixed martial arts (MMA) competition, this paper offers a cogent reconstruction of the technique.

Of particular interest is the reference to “the one who wrestles with the heel” (τόν προσπαλαίοντα τῆ πτέρνῃ). In *Imagines* 2.6, Philostratus — before he goes on to describe how Arrachion forced his opponent to surrender by dislocating his ankle — noted that pankratiasts “wrestle with an ankle” (σφυρῶ προσπαλαίουσι). It would appear that “wrestling with an ankle” and “wrestling with the heel” are both descriptions of submission foot locks, the latter differentiated by a specific involvement of the heel not found in the former.

More than likely, “wrestling with the heel” is a reference to a kind of foot lock known today as a *heel hook*. The several variations of the heel hook are applied by wrapping one's legs around the opponent's leg and hugging the opponent's ankle to one's side with the forearm, the opponent's foot so oriented that the heel visibly protrudes from under the top side of the other's forearm. The one applying the hold clasps his hands together so as to be able to use the force of both arms to pull back to secure his opponent's ankle to his side. With the opponent's ankle thus secured to his side, the one applying the hold need only twist his torso a little ways one way or the other to exert a painful torque on the ankle that can be transmitted up the leg to the knee.<sup>4</sup> A typical response to the heel hook

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<sup>3</sup> Gardiner 1955:215–216.

<sup>4</sup> As a recreational practitioner of the grappling art of Brazilian jiu-jitsu, I was able to learn the heel hook first hand from expert instructors. Due to the growing popularity of mixed martial arts in conjunction with the proliferation of internet video media, many difficult-to-describe grappling techniques — undocumented in scholarly literature — may be readily accessed at the computer monitor in the form of video tutorials or competition footage. A search under “heel hook” on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) will yield a number of clips showing the execution of the technique in its many variations, including those in which the hold is applied to a standing opponent by an attacker who has dropped down onto his back.

is to repeatedly jerk the entangled leg back and thrust it forward to try to extricate the seized foot, while at the same time using the free leg to push away or kick at the attacker. In order to secure the submission, the attacker must maintain his hold on the seized foot throughout this struggle.

The details that it was necessary for the one wrestling with the heel to be trampled upon (πατεῖσθαι) and to lie under his opponent — or more accurately to lie down or lay himself down (ὕποκεῖσθαι) under his opponent — indicate that the manoeuvre was probably a variation of heel hook known today as the *falling heel hook*. The variation takes its name from the fact that it is initiated from a standing position by falling down on one’s back in an attempt to apply a heel hook on the still-standing opponent. It would begin with the combatants facing each other in a “tie-up” position, e.g., each with his right hand on the back of the other’s neck, left hand on the other’s right elbow. Assuming the opponent’s left leg to be targeted, the attacker would step his right leg as far forward between his opponent’s legs as he could, dropping down and lying back so that his right leg would be raised straight up behind the opponent. The attacker would then pivot his supine torso around to the right, grapevining his right leg around his opponent’s left leg and clutching the opponent’s left ankle to his right side with his right arm to apply the heel hook.

There is also a variation in which from the supine position the attacker, rather than pivoting his torso around to the right, would instead bring his left heel up and brace it in the right hollow of the other’s hip. By grasping the opponent’s left ankle with his right hand and pushing against the right side of the opponent’s hip with his left heel, the attacker would be able to make the opponent fall over and then apply the heel hook to the downed opponent as opposed to the still-standing opponent.

Either of these variations may explain the name — a *hapax legomenon* — given to the technique, τὸ ἀποπτερνίζειν. *LSJ* gives the meaning of ἀποπτερνίζω as *thrust off with the heel*,<sup>5</sup> a compound form of πτερνίζω *strike with the heel* or *trip up*, from πτέρνη *heel*. Thus τὸ ἀποπτερνίζειν would be “the thrusting-off-with-the-heel thing”. As previously mentioned, a typical response to the heel hook would be to repeatedly jerk the entangled leg back and thrust it forward to try to extricate the seized foot, while at the same time using the free leg to push away or kick at the attacker; in the case of the falling heel hook, these defensive moves would begin in the standing position. This would explain the oracular pronouncement that victory would entail being trampled upon and the subsequent realization that the pronouncement meant that the trampling would be the inevitable result of

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the citation in *LSJ* is referenced according to the older Kayser text’s system of chapter division.

tenaciously maintaining a grip on the opponent's foot (ὅτι κελεύει αὐτὸν μὴ μεθίεσθαι τοῦ ποδός). Since this trampling phase of the manoeuvre would certainly be a dramatic feature of the matches in which Halter competed, the thrusting off with the heel might very well refer to the opponent's energetic reaction to the heel hook attack.<sup>6</sup> Alternately, the thrusting off with the heel may refer to the variation of the falling heel hook in which the attacker — once supine — uses his heel to push his standing opponent over. Either way, some kind of thrusting off with the heel was involved during the execution of the falling heel hook, and this salient feature became the nickname for the falling heel hook itself.

The *Revised Supplement* to *LSJ* gives the meaning of ἀποπτερνίζω as *trip up* (an opponent) *by twisting his heel*, probably influenced by Gardiner's description of the technique as a throwing of the opponent by means of a grip on his heel. Grossardt endorses this view, understanding the opponent to have been pushed away (*wegzustossen*) by means of a grip on his heel.<sup>7</sup> This paper takes a dissenting view from the *Supplement's* definition. Adding the -ίζω suffix to πτέρνη turns the noun *heel* into a denominative verb with the meaning of *to heel* someone, i.e., *to strike someone with the heel*. (Similar English usages are *to elbow* and *to knee* someone.) Probably because a common tripping technique involves using one's heel to reap another's leg out from under him, πτερνίζω also carries the meaning of *trip up*.<sup>8</sup> It is clear in both of these usages that it is the subject who is

<sup>6</sup> A couple of anonymous readers have called attention to what they perceived as a problem with either Halter or Philostratus calling the technique by a name reflecting the opponent's energetic evasive reactions to the technique. To this it may be answered that it is unlikely that Philostratus himself would have named the technique; rather, he was probably citing an already named technique from one of his sources. Moreover, since Halter's efforts at executing the technique put him on the receiving end of the opponent's heel-thrusting and trampling, it would not have been unreasonable for him to think of the risky move in terms of its elicitation of such reactions from the opponent. There is also the possibility that the name may have been coined by some spectator upon viewing the opponent's efforts to escape the signature move, the name catching on with other spectators and spreading among pankration aficionados; that Halter discovered or devised (εὐρών) the technique doesn't necessarily mean that he named it.

<sup>7</sup> Grossardt 2006a:195 "Als er aber als erster die Technik herausfand, den Gegner im Kampf mit einem Griff zur Ferse wegzustossen, da begriff er, dass Protesilaos ihm aufgetragen hatte, nicht vom gegnerischen Fuss abzulassen"; "und dazu die Ferse des Gegners ergreift und in bestimmter Weise wegdreht", 2006b:427.

<sup>8</sup> A clause in *LXX Je.9.3(4)* doubly underscores this point: ὅτι πᾶς ἀδελφὸς πτέρνην πτερνιῖ, *because every brother will trip up* (πτερνιῖ) *with the heel* (πτέρνη). The Suda has a listing for Πτερνίζει, giving the definition as ἀπατᾶ ἢ λακτίζει. *LSJ* gives the meaning of ἀπατᾶ as *cheat* or *deceive*, which could be taken as a kind of metaphorical *tripping up*; the meaning of λακτίζω is given as *kick with the heel* and, interestingly, *trample on*. I would like to thank the anonymous *Akroterion* reader for the pointing out the Suda reference and for making other helpful suggestions.

using his own heel to strike or trip up someone else. Prefixing the preposition ἀπό to περνίζω shouldn't alter the fact that the subject is still using his own heel against someone else; it simply adds the dimension that the subject is using his own heel to move someone else *away from* him. The *Supplement's* definition of ἀποπερνίζω as *trip up* (an opponent) *by twisting his heel* seems to cobble together περνίζω's meaning of *trip up* and Gardiner's understanding of the manoeuvre as the opponent's being thrown by means of a grip on his heel, the active role of the heel in the tripping up somehow getting lost along the way. That ἀποπερνίζω should denote the subject's use of the other's own heel to trip him up is simply not justified, especially in light of the fact that the falling heel hook and its variation both involve the use of one's own heel to thrust someone else away, be it the standing opponent attempting to heel thrust his way out of the supine attacker's grasp or the supine attacker using his heel to push the standing opponent over. *LSJ* had it right all along: ἀποπερνίζω's meaning is *thrust off with the heel*.

In summary, this brief excerpt from *Heroicus* preserves the only known reference to a particular grappling term and provides just enough technical information to facilitate a reconstruction of the technique. It is also interesting to note that a work dealing with the veneration of the Homeric hero Protesilaos would have that cult hero providing a pankratiast with the oracular advice that aided him in developing his signature move.

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