

“Plato the Wrestler”  
for  
Plato’s Academy: A Survey of the Evidence  
Sunday, December 16, 2012

[1] At the end of the *Republic* (617D-621D) Plato sets forth his ideas about the immortality of the soul, and presents a series of stories concerning long-gone souls who are about to be reincarnated. They are to choose their status for their new life cycle. Odysseus, for example, chooses the life of an ordinary citizen who stays home and minds his own business (620C). Atalanta, THE tomboy of Greek mythology, sees the great honors of the male athlete (μεγάλας τιμᾶς ἐθλητοῦ ἄνδρός) and seizes them (620B). It seems, then, a delicious irony that this portrait herm of Plato languished for a century in the basement of the women’s gymnasium at the University of California at Berkeley.

[2] You have already seen something of this portrait in the talk presented just now by Ismene Trianti, but let me make certain points. The front of the herm has three texts. The first is standard: name, patronymic, and ethnic - Plato, son of Ariston, of Athens. The second and third texts, written in somewhat smaller letters, are quotes from Plato. The first of these (αἰτία •λομένῃ θεός ἐναίτιος) is from the beginning of the section in the *Republic* (617E) that we have just mentioned, although our received texts have the genitive •λομένου rather than the dative on the stone. It refers to the choice one makes for one’s next life cycle and we might translate it freely as “You made the choice. Don’t blame God”. The third text (ψυχῶ δὲ πᾶσα ἐθάνατος) is a quote from the *Phaedrus* (245C) but again deals with the same subject already noted from the end of the *Republic* - every soul is immortal.

[3] We would seem, then, to have a perfectly straightforward, labeled portrait of Plato, embellished with quotations from his work. I would mention in passing that the marble is Parian (as proven by analysis) and that several of the letters preserve the pigment *miltos* characteristic of ancient inscriptions. Why, then, has this portrait not been long known and taken its place in the repertoire of Plato’s portraits? The answer is because, as noted in the Berkeley museum inventory, it has a ribbon coming down from the head and onto each shoulder, and ribbons - it was believed - are worn only by gods and not by men. We should note that the ends of the ribbon are rounded.

[4] In fact, as we see from the side, in addition to the ribbon (or *tainia*), there is a headband (or *mitra*) holding the ribbon in place. I should also mention that the head had been broken off the herm shaft at some point in time and subjected to an acid bath which has given the surface of the marble of the head an unfortunate glaze which I suspect was not endearing to Berkeley connoisseurs of past generations.

[5] But even though the ribbons were broken, they were clearly once continuous and assure that head and shaft were originally one unit. Is the ribbon really exclusively the domain of the divine? In fact, they are to be seen on deities only a small fraction of the times that we see them in a human context, and the latter is specifically in athletic scenes.

[6] I do not want to tire you with the dozens and dozens of examples, but I do want to give you a few so that you might better understand the Berkeley Plato's ribbons. Here is a 4<sup>th</sup> century red-figure crater in the Louvre (G 502) where Nike holds out a ribbon to a runner at the starting line - a sort of carrot to lure him on to victory. Note that the ends of the ribbon are rounded and have little strings coming from them. These are to be understood as the ends of the threads from which the ribbon had been woven, and which were tied together to prevent unraveling of the ribbon.

[7] A Panathenaic amphora of 363/2 B.C. (AthNM20048) shows Nike holding out the ribbon while she waits for the victor in a wrestling bout to be decided. Plato was in his mid-60's when this vase was painted. Again, please note the rounded ends of the ribbon with their trailing strings.

[8] Another Panathenaic, this time from 340/39 B.C. (Louvre MNC 706) a few years after Plato's death, shows the sequence of a victory celebration. The trumpeter at the right has already signaled to the crowd for silence so that the herald (center right) can be heard as he calls out the name of the victor. The victor himself (center left) holds the palm branch which, together with the ribbon that is draped over his shoulder awaiting to be tied around his head, were the preliminary symbols of his triumph. To the left, the victor, still holding his palm branch but now with the ribbon around his head and streaming in the breeze behind him, runs off for his victory lap, his *periagermos*.

[9] A red figure pelike (Vienna IV.769), painted when Plato was a teenager, shows a victor whose ribbon is held in place by a head-band like the Berkeley Plato. He holds sprigs of greenery and Nike adorns him with others, perhaps a

reference to the *phyllobolia* which was a part of the victory celebration immediately after the triumph when the crowd showered the winner with leaves as he took his victory lap, his *periagermos*.<sup>1</sup> On the left, a loser looks dejectedly at his strigil. Note again the strings at the end of the ribbon painted in a different color. I would imagine that the marble ribbons of the Berkeley Plato had exactly such strings added in paint.

**[10]** The final stage of the victory celebration, at least at Olympia, was the award of the crown of olive to each of the victors after which they were invited to the prytaneion for a banquet. A Boeotian kantharos (Louvre CA 1139) painted shortly before the birth of Plato may be a reference to such a banquet: a young man reclines next to a table with a kantharos on it, holding a sprig of olive in his left hand and a crown in his right. (The crown looks to me to be of wild celery, but that is perhaps because of a prejudiced Nemean eye.) For us the significant detail is the *mitra* or headband that holds in place a *tainia* or ribbon with a rounded end.

**[11]** Thus the ribbon and the headband on the Berkeley Plato might be taken to indicate that Plato was an athletic victor. We shall return to this point, but first another possibility must be examined. In addition to international athletic competitions such as those at Olympia or Nemea, and to competitions at local festivals such as the Panathenaia, there were constant competitions for school-boys in the context of the gymnasium. These were both physical competitions - usually called Hermaia and dedicated to Hermes - and musical competitions called Mouseia and dedicated to the Muses.<sup>2</sup> They thus reflect the bipartite educational emphasis that Plato recommends over and over<sup>3</sup>, that he probably experienced as a teenager, and that he surely supervised in the Academy.

**[12]** It is clear that ribbons were also tokens of victory in these “school” contests. A red figure kylix (BMFA 10.181) from a generation before Plato’s birth shows a scene in an architectural context, surely a *palaistra*, as indicated by the column. To the right an older man, perhaps the *gymnasiarchos*, holds out a ribbon to a young man who already has one ribbon around his head and another on his right biceps.

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<sup>1</sup> For the rather more complicated aspects of the *periagermos* and the *phyllobolia* than are presented here, see E. Κεφαλίδου, *ΝΙΚΗΤΗΣ* (Thessaloniki 1996) 52-56 and 73-76

<sup>2</sup> Plato specifies the appointment of officials for competitions in music and gymnastic at *Laws* 764C-E and 828C.

<sup>3</sup> *Republic* 410C-D, 411 C-412A, 441E, 535D, 548C; *Timaeus* 88C.

**[13]** A slightly older kylix (NYMet79.11.9-G54), on which interior space is indicated by the sponge, aryballos, and strigil that hang on the wall, shows two young men heavily adorned with ribbons. One almost gets the idea that the ribbons were grades or rewards for good performance in school and not just for victories. Does the ribbon on the Berkeley Plato portrait herm belong to this category? Do teachers get grades?

**[14]** A red figure crater (Agrig,R 178) from about the time of Plato's birth shows that a herm could be adorned with ribbon and crown, even though in this case the herm must represent Hermes himself and not a as shown by the *kerykeion* on the side of the shaft below the shoulder stub. But the scene is again set in the context of the palaistra/gymasion where Hermes was especially venerated.

**[15]** By the Hellenistic period as we know best, but not exclusively, from Delos, the palaistra was filled with herms like this example which are specifically portrait herms of successful gymnasiarchoi whose students wished to honor them.

**[16]** In the case of Athens, many such herms come from the Diogeneion, the palaistra in downtown Athens that was concerned with Ephebic training at least in the Roman period. Here is an example with the portrait of Sositratos (NM 385), the *kosmetes* - we might say the Superintendent of Education - in A.D. 141/2. Might such a portrait herm have been draped with a woolen ribbon that has not survived? Is the Berkeley Plato a translation of that ribbon into stone? But by this analogy, we should have expected the Berkeley Plato to have been inscribed with details of his career as a teacher in the Academy as in the example of Sositratos. The ribbons on the Berkeley Plato must refer to some other aspect of his life. (By the way, might excavations of the Academy produce such herms from an earlier period, from the period of Plato?)

**[17a-b]** We return to the area of athletic victories and the issue of Plato as athlete, and here I would return to the Berkeley Plato and a consideration of its ears. The right ear is a reasonably formed ear which shows a marked slant back toward the top. The left ear, however, is more nearly vertical but has an enlarged, puffy lobe which speaks of disfigurement. In the *Protagoras* (342C), Plato states that admirers of Sparta bind up their hands with *himantes* (the ancient equivalent of boxing gloves) so that they can box and get broken ears in imitation of their Spartan heroes. This recalls the tradition that Spartans invented boxing as a means to harden their faces (Philostratos, *On gymnastics* 9). Plato's puffy ear might mean that he was an admirer of Sparta, but not necessarily a boxer.

Indeed, we are told that his athletic specialty was wrestling, or at least that he was trained by Ariston the Argive wrestler (Diog.Laet.3.4). It may be relevant that, although Plato uses all the *gymnikoi* competitions as metaphors or in reference to specific points, the allusions to wrestling are far greater than those to any other competition.<sup>4</sup> He further cites wrestling as the one gymnastic exercise which is particularly useful (*Laws* 796A), especially for military training (*Laws* 814D). He refers to a work by Protagoras as “on wrestling” - probably as a metaphor for disputation (*Sophist* 232D), and he knows the names of the wrestling coaches of the two sons of Thucydides, son of Melesias (*Meno* 94C).

Finally, Dikaiarchos (*apud* Diog. Laet. 3.4) tells us that Plato competed in the Isthmian Games. But there is no mention of a victory. A later source adds a competition at Delphi to that at Isthmia<sup>5</sup>, and another says that he was victorious at Olympia and Nemea.<sup>6</sup> Modern scholarship has doubted these sources and has said implicitly that if Plato had been an Olympic victor, such a fact would have been preserved in contemporary sources. Perhaps.

Here I would note three coincidences. First, the name of the victor in wrestling at Olympia for 408 B.C., when Plato was in his late teens or very early twenties, is not preserved in our sources. Gaps in our knowledge of the names of Olympic victors are, of course, frequent, but at least a Platonic victory at Olympia in 408 would be possible unlike 404 B.C. when the wrestling victor was probably Symmachos of Elis.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, the original Olympic victor list seems certainly to have been made

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<sup>4</sup> **footraces** (seven times), **pankration** (once), **pentathlon** (once), **boxing** (six times), and **wrestling** (ten times): Footraces in general: *Theaetetus* 148C; *Hippias maior* 295C; *Hippias minor* 373C-374B; *Cratylus* 414B. The diaulos (double stadion) specifically: *Republic* 613B-C. The dolichos (long distance) specifically: *Protagoras* 335E; *Laws* 822A. Pankration: *Euthydemus* 271C. Pentathlon: *Cratylus* 413A-B. Boxing: *Philebus* 22E; *Alcibiades minor* 145D; *Charmides* 159C; *Laws* 819B and 830A-B, *Republic* 422B-C. Wrestling: *Philebus* 41B; *Alcibiades maior* 107A and 108B; *Charmides* 159C; *Hippias maior* 295C; *Protagoras* 343C and 350E; *Hippias minor* 373C-374B; *Republic* 544A; *Laws* 819B. See also F. G. Herrmann, "Wrestling Metaphors in Plato's 'Theaetetus'," *Nikephoros* 8 (1995) 77-110.

<sup>5</sup> [Apuleius], *de Dogmate Platonis* 1.15 ". . . Pythia et Isthmia de lucta certaverit"

<sup>6</sup> *Anonymous Prolegomena Philosophiae Platonicae* 2.35: δὲο ἐγ<naw aÈtÚn nik∞sai, ÉOIÊmpiã te ka< N∞mea

<sup>7</sup> Paus. 6.1.3. See L. Moretti, *Olympionikai* (Rome 1957) no. 353

by Hippias of Elis at a date around 400 B.C.<sup>8</sup> This is, of course, the Hippias who appears frequently in the pages of Plato, and especially in the two dialogues to which his name was given.

Finally, it was Aristotle who revised and updated Hippias' Olympic victor register perhaps two generations after the original. If Hippias' list did not include the Olympic wrestling victory for 408 B.C., Aristotle's certainly did.

Are these coincidences irrelevant? Perhaps, but they are certainly tantalizing.

Now I am going to ask for your indulgence. I would ask that you think of Plato as a human being, and specifically as a young Athenian male. Please suspend source criticism. For what follows there are sources (albeit many of them late), or at least natural inferences, and I hope to make the question of Plato, the wrestler, a little more vivid.

**[18]** It is August, 416 B.C., and the pre-teen Plato rushes into his home to tell his father Ariston that he knows what he wants to be when he grows up: Olympic Victor!

Such a scenario should not surprise us, for Plato states that the life of the Olympic victor is the most blessed of all (*Rep.* 465D), although he also expresses unhappiness with an overwhelming and all consuming pursuit of such a status (*Laws* 807C) and values as even greater than such victories a reputation for service to native laws (*Laws* 729D). Nonetheless, he ends the *Republic* with a comparison of the rewards for a life well lived with the victory lap (*periagermos*) of winners at the Games.

Asked by Ariston what has motivated his decision to become an Olympic victor, Plato responds that the recent Olympic victory by Alcibiades with all the attendant hoopla and public rewards such as a lifetime of free meals in the prytaneion have made him want to receive such attention, too.

Ariston reminds him that Alcibiades won at Olympia in the chariot race and that in order to secure the victory, he entered seven chariots - that is, 28 horses - a costly way to acquire Olympic status.

Here we might note that in the *Apology* (36D), Sokrates reckons that his punishment should be a lifetime of free meals in the prytaneion since he has performed services to the state that outweigh a victory at Olympia. But he

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<sup>8</sup> See P. Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists and Ancient Greek History* (Cambridge 2007) 45-56.

specifically refers to Olympic victories in the horse races. In other words, victories in the gymnikai agones like wrestling are more important than equestrian victories that can be bought. Given that Alcibiades was the first Athenian to win an equestrian victory in some twenty years,<sup>9</sup> I feel certain that Sokrates has the famous example of Alcibiades' victory at Olympia in mind when he makes the distinction.<sup>10</sup> Does he also have a wrestling victory by Plato to temper his suggestion?

[19] Since Plato has brought up the issue of his future, Ariston consults with his wife about their son's education. Periktione thinks Plato is still too young, but Ariston insists that it is time for Plato to begin his schooling.

[20] Plato was probably sent to a private school or palaistra like that of Mikkos - the setting for the *Lysis*<sup>11</sup> - and the scenes from that dialogue can be taken as characteristic: boys playing knucklebones, sacrifices taking place in the courtyard and lessons, including informal ones from visitors like Sokrates.

[21] Whichever the school, we can be certain that Plato's lessons were divided into the two basic types of music and gymnastic as he mentions several times in the context both of education (e.g. *Lovers* 132D, *Republic* 548C) and of intrastate competitions (e.g. *Laws* 828C). The most typical musical lesson was that with the kithara or lyre; flute-playing was not so popular at least to judge from Alcibiades' refusal to learn it.<sup>12</sup>

[22] In this palaistra Plato will have learned to exercise in the nude, to rub his body with oil, and - at the end of the day - to use his strigil to scrape off the oil and sweat and dirt, being careful to deposit the *gloios* - as this gunk was called - into a special container so that it could be sold as an ointment. The ultimate recycling of ancient Greece.

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<sup>9</sup> Megakles, son of Megakles, won the tethrippon race at Olympia in 436 B.C.; Moretti, #320.

<sup>10</sup> Alcibiades' Olympic victory in 416 B.C. was clearly a hot topic: Thuc. 6.16.12; Isokrates, *Team of Horses* 32-35; Plut., *Alcibiades*, 11-12. The Olympic victory was probably a year after his victory at Nemea which Alcibiades celebrated with an infamous painting of him seated on the lap of Nemea (Ath. 12.534D; Paus. 1.22.7; Plut. *Alc.* 16.5). The ribbons which he wears in the *Symposion* (212C-213E), as he staggers drunk into the house of Agathon, may also be a reference to his equestrian victories.

<sup>11</sup> Diogenes Laertius, 3.4, says that Plato learnt letters at the School of Dionysios and refers to the *Lovers* (132A). But there we read that Sokrates went into the grammar school of Dionysios, not that he - or Plato - studied there. Cf. Plutarch, *Moralia* 776B. Perhaps Diogenes had some other source.

<sup>12</sup> *Alcibiades* I, 106E; cf. Plut. *Alc.* 2.4.

[23] It was almost certainly also in the context of the palaistra that he first met Sokrates, probably to the consternation of his mother.

[24] It was here, too, I imagine that that Sokrates saw the ugly duckling that he had dreamt the night before would turn into a graceful swan (Diogenes Laertius 3.5).

During this time, and given that Plato still had his sights set on an Olympic victory, we can imagine that he lobbied his father to take him to the games. He certainly went to Olympia at least twice in later life (*Letters* 350B; Aelian, *Varia Historia* 4.9), and there is no reason why he, now in his teens, should not have gone to the Games of 412 B.C.

[25] Perhaps Ariston took him to the corner of the agora, to the shop of Simon, to get new sandals for the journey. If so, he might well have run into Sokrates hanging around there (Diogenes Laertius 2.122; Plutarch, *Moralia* 776B).

[26] Plato and Ariston are likely to have set out on their journey early so that they could spend some time at Elis in the Olympic training camp before the actual games 60 kilometers down the road in the Sanctuary of Zeus. Plato would thus have an idea of whether his hopes to wrestle at Olympia in four years were reasonable. He could have had some practice bouts, and perhaps it was there that their paths crossed with another Ariston, a coach from Argos. Wherever and whenever the meeting took place, Plato certainly had two Aristons in his life, father and coach. (Diogenes Laertius 3.4).

[27] Once at Olympia, Plato was certain to visit the sacred wild olive tree, the *kallistephanos*, at the back end of the Temple of Zeus (Pausanias 5.15.3). He would have looked and tentatively touched and dreamt of what it would be like to wear a crown from those branches.

[28] Another sight which would have mesmerized him was the *Altis*, the sacred square around the Temple which was filled with statues of Olympic victors. At one point Plato even has a bronze statue at Olympia promised to Sokrates if he can give a better speech than Lysias (*Phaedrus* 236B). Did Plato aspire for a statue of his own in this setting where only Olympic victors were allowed to erect statues of themselves?

[29] Back at Athens, and now of an age to go to the public gymnasia, he would have begun training in earnest, learning all the wrestling positions and holds and throws. Which gymnasium did he attend? Given that he was from the deme

Kollytos, which may have been northwest of the classical agora,<sup>13</sup> and certainly was on the side of the city toward the Academy and away from the Lykeion and Kynosarges, Plato must have begun his life-long ties to the Academy while a teenager.

[30] Now, in 408 B.C. after four years of preparation, was it back to Olympia? Did Plato throw his opponents, or was he thrown?

[31] Did he win a ribbon and a headband and a crown of olive and dinner in the Olympia prytaneion?

[32] I cannot prove that he did, nor can I prove that he did not. But I am certain that without a knowledge of ancient Greek athletics - both in a competitive context and in an educational one - we cannot fully understand Plato, and we cannot fully understand the Academy.

[33] Finally, we should recognize one other possible interpretation of the ribbons on the Berkeley Plato. As we have already seen, both inscriptions on the herm shaft refer to the immortality of the soul and the need to be careful in choosing a definition of the nature of the soul. Let us remember the last words of the *Republic* where Sokrates says:

“If we are guided by me we shall believe that the soul is immortal and can endure every kind of bad and every kind of good (nomōntew éyānaton cuxōn ka< dunatōn pānta mēn kakā én°xesyai, pānta dē égayā), and so we shall always adhere to the upward path and pursue justice with wisdom in every way so that we will be friends to ourselves and to the gods, while we remain here, and afterward when we receive our reward, just as the victors in the games do their *periagermos*, (Àsper ofl nikhfōroi periageirōmenoi) and we will fare well both here (on earth) and in that thousand-year journey of which I have told you.”

The *Republic* ends.

Thus, the ribbons of the Berkeley portrait should be understood as the visual symbol of that *periagermos* by a Plato victorious in the struggle - in wrestling with all the obstacles - to attain justice with wisdom.

Stephen G. Miller

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<sup>13</sup> W.E. Thompson, “Notes on Attic Demes,” *Hesperia* 39 (1970) 66-67. Most other scholars have placed Kollytos south of the Akropolis and the Areopagus; see J. S. Traill, “The Political Organization of Attica,” *Hesperia Supp.* 14 (1975) 40.

Ancient Nemea  
December 5, 2012

### ABSTRACT

A recently published portrait herm, the Berkeley Plato, raises questions about his athletic career as a youth. There can be no doubt that he was a wrestler as shown both by later sources and his own vocabulary, but did he compete internationally? Was he an Olympic athlete? Was he an Olympic victor? Or was wrestling so much a part of Athenian education that Plato the Wrestler is an expression of a societal norm? Or both?

Or is the portrait not so much of the man, as it is of his philosophy?