

## Pankration: MMA of Ancient Greece

Pankration: MMA of Ancient Greece 2006-11-29 Mixed martial arts didn't start with the UFC. It didn't even start with modern cross-trainers such as Bruce Lee. In both the East and the West, warriors have studied and fought in MMA events since the days of old. In Ancient Greece, this art was pankration. Between 2000 B.C. and 1100 B.C., the vibrant Minoan civilization flourished on the island of Crete. These people spread to the Greek mainland and founded the Mycenaean civilization. The legendary figures of later Ancient Greece — Achilles, Theseus, Daidalos, the Minotaur — were rooted in this history. However, the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations collapsed into a Dark Age, due in large part to the invasion of the "Sons of Herakles," the warlike Dorians. Greece began to rise up from the darkness in the eighth century B.C. The Illiad, Homer's epic of the Trojan War, was recorded, and the Olympic games were founded. The Dorians had left their own martial imprint on culture, however. From the 800s B.C. onward, Greek history is marked with constant battles between city-states such as Athens, Thebes, and Sparta, as well as warfare with Persia and the other powers of the Mediterranean. It should be no surprise, then, that the Olympic games and other athletic festivals centered on the practices of war. Javelin throwing, chariot racing, boxing (pyx), wrestling (pale), and mixed martial arts (pankration, literally, "all powers," meaning all techniques) quickly supplemented footraces as the most important events. The pale (wrestling) was a stand-up throwing event, much like stand-up judo and shuai-chiao. The goal was to be the first to throw your opponent to the ground three times. Techniques included modern wrestling takedowns, suplexes, leg hooks, and hip throws very similar to judo and jiu-jitsu moves. The legendary strongman, Milo of Croton, won several Olympic pale championships. The pyx (boxing) was a bare-knuckle boxing competition claimed to have been invented by the Spartans. Boxers wore himantes, leather wraps similar to modern hand wraps, but no gloves. This allowed boxers to catch and parry strikes with their open palms. Training incorporated heavy bag work (korykoi), shadow boxing, and sparring with padded gloves. In competition, the gloves came off. Vase paintings and other contemporary artwork suggest that boxers were primarily headhunters, with relatively little interest in working body blows. Speed and strategy were as highly esteemed as raw strength, as several David vs. Goliath stories indicate. Endurance was also a factor, as it is in modern boxing and kickboxing matches, since there were no rounds and no time limits. For the Ancient Greeks, pankration was the king of the fighting events. Herakles, the demigod of physical strength, was the patron of pankratiasts. In the eyes of the Greeks, pankration fighters, like Herakles, epitomized fighting prowess. Of pankration, Philostratos, a contemporary of the Games, wrote, "pankratiasts... have to endure black eyes... and learn holds by which one who has fallen can still win, and they must be skillful in various ways of strangulation. They bend ankles and twist arms and throw punches and jump on their opponents. All such practices are permitted in the pankration except for biting and gouging." This description reads like the rules of any modern no-holds-barred competition. In fact, competitions were even held in much the same format as modern MMA elimination tournaments. Techniques included boxing, kicking, elbow and knee strikes, head butts, joint locks, chokes, throws, and ground grappling. Philostratos, writing like a fight commentator on the championship pankration match of the 564 B.C. Olympics, describes the winner slipping behind his opponent in a standing double grapevine. He then applies a rear naked choke and drops one foot to sweep his opponent to the ground, sinking in the choke for the submission. Pankration was more than a sporting event. It was the foundation of all Greek soldiers' combat training. The hoplites of Sparta, and even the warriors of Alexander the Great's army, all practiced regional forms of pankration. Unfortunately, with the fall of the Greek and Roman civilizations in the European Dark Ages, the ancient art of pankration was lost. Some modern martial artists have worked to recover the lost art. At the forefront is Jim Arvanitis, founder of Mu Tau Pankration, a modern fighting style based on research of ancient pankration. Like its ancient forebear, Mu Tau encompasses stand-up and ground fighting, with a combination of strikes, throws, and submissions. Maskatsu Funaki's Pancrase MMA tournament also gets its inspiration from ancient pankration. It seems fitting that pankration has been revived in the same era that has spawned such hybrids as modern MMA, Jeet Kune Do, and Hiep-Tinh-Mon. References: Miller, S.G. Ancient Greek Athletics. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2004.---. Arete: Greek Sports From Ancient Sources. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991.