

## Milo of Croton: ἑπτάκι[ς]?

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### Introduction

Milo of Croton (whose floruit occurred in the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC) was a wrestler, and one of the greatest – if not the greatest – athlete of the ancient Olympic Games.<sup>1</sup> He became a famous symbol of brute strength, viz. a symbol of ‘brawn’ rather than ‘brains.’ In this guise he appeared regularly in stories about the limits of physical strength, especially in comparison to intellectual achievement.<sup>2</sup> Writers liked to dwell upon his human frailty in spite of his athletic prowess, and on his unflattering death. Something which has not been emphasized sufficiently is that the only athlete who is credited with having beaten Milo at Olympia was a man who is supposed to have used his brains to overcome Milo’s brawn. Does this give reason for suspicion that the evidence might be more literary than historical in character? Could we be dealing with another example of the ‘brawn versus brains’ topos? In light of this ubiquitous theme, should we accept the widespread idea that Milo suffered a defeat at Olympia? The aims of this paper are to demonstrate the insecure foundations of this idea and to build on an earlier suggestion that Milo might have won 7 Olympic crowns after all, rather than 6.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harris (1964) 110-13; Finley and Pleket (1976) 38, 63, 94-5, 102, 116, 123, 125; Glubok and Tamarin (1976) 75-7; Poliakoff (1987) 117-19, 182-3; Sweet (1987); Maddoli (1992) 46-9; Visa-Ondarçuhu (1997) 33-62; Golden (2004) 103; Spivey (2004) 65-6, 100-1.

<sup>2</sup> Cicero (*Sen.* 10.33), for instance, asks ‘which would you prefer to be given, Milo’s physical vigour or the intellectual might of Pythagoras?’ Lucian (*Her.* 7-8) offers his own talents for appreciation in a games context, asking his audience to forget the likes of Polydamas, Glaukos, and Milo. Galen (*Exhortation* 13 [1.34-5 Kühn]) doubts whether the strength of Milo could have saved Greece from the barbarians and quotes Euripides to the effect that ‘Wise counsel means more than many men.’ Cf. Ael. *VH* 2.24, where Milo is inferior to his mistress, and 12.22, where Milo proves less strong than Titormus of Aetolia, who is acknowledged as ‘another Herakles.’

<sup>3</sup> Maddoli (1992) 46-9 is open to the idea that Milo might have won 7 Olympic victories on grounds that Simonides mentions 7 victories and that centuries later Pausanias might have made an error in counting only 6, possibly due to a story which he interpreted as a defeat (see below). Aside from some fresh points on matters of detail, I want to emphasize in this paper the likelihood that our evidence is undermined heavily by the ‘brawn versus brains’ topos.

## 1. The Stories

Milo is said to have worn the gizzard-stones of roosters about him, in order to render himself invincible in his athletic contests (Plin. *HN* 37.54.144; Solin. 1.77). His prodigious appetite and great strength were regularly celebrated, though he emerges rather like a carnival glutton or circus strongman.<sup>4</sup> He is said to have consumed 20 pounds of meat, 20 pounds of bread, and 8 quarts of wine per day (a diet of protein, carbohydrates, and alcohol).<sup>5</sup> He carried his own heavy statue into the *altis* at Olympia and set it up himself to celebrate his victories. He would stand with his right elbow tucked into his side, forearm extended forward from the elbow, his fingers spread and his thumb pointing upwards, challenging onlookers to bend his fingers. It seems that no one was able to bend even his little finger. He apparently held a pomegranate in his hand and defied anyone to force him to release it. No one succeeded. To everyone's amazement, when Milo relaxed his grip, the fruit was revealed uncrushed, with no sign of a blemish. He could stand on an oiled discus and laugh at those who tried to push him off. He could tie a string or ribbon around his forehead and snap it by holding his breath and expanding the blood vessels in his head (Paus. 6.14.6-8; cf. Philostr. *VA* 4.28; Ael. *VH* 2.24). There seems little doubt that some of these stories are the result of misinterpretations of statues in archaic style which showed Milo (e.g.) tying the fillet of victory around his forehead, holding an apple or pomegranate, and standing on a disc that would have been fitted into a base (Philostr. *VA* 4.28; Harris [1964] 111-12). On another occasion he is said to have lifted a fully grown (four-year-old) bull, slung it across his shoulders, and carried it around the stadium at Olympia – to the astonishment of the crowd. Milo proceeded to kill, cut up, and eat the entire bull by himself, apparently on the same day (Cic. *Sen.* 10.33; Galen, *Exhortation* 13 [1.34-5 Kühn]; Ath. 10.412; Solin. 1.76).

Such feats drew the ridicule of moralists, who were debating the relative merits of 'brawn versus brains' or the true worth of a human being or the ideal manner of life. Cicero, for instance, asked (*Sen.* 9.27):

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<sup>4</sup> On eating contests and Milo's appetite, see Ath. 10.412-13.

<sup>5</sup> Ath. 10.412-13 (quoting Theodorus of Hierapolis in his book on the Games) says that Milo 'ate twenty *minae* of meat, and an equal quantity of bread, and drank three *choes* of wine.' On these quantities, cf. Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 2.6.7 (1106b). An Aristotelian fragment (*FHG* 2.183) says that 'Milo was a huge eater...and a real man.'

What cry can be more contemptible than that of Milo of Croton? When he had grown old, he saw some athletes training on the track, looked at his own arms, wept and said, ‘And these, indeed, are now dead.’ Not so, you idiot. It is you who are dead, for your nobility came not from yourself but from your trunk and your arms.<sup>6</sup>

According to Diodorus Siculus (9.14.1):

It is no great thing to possess strength, whatever kind it is, but to use it as one should. For of what advantage to Milo of Croton was his enormous strength of body?

Galen the physician exclaimed (*Exhortation* 13 [1.34-5 Kühn]):

What surpassing witlessness, not to realize even this much, that a short while before, when the bull was alive, the animal’s mind held up its own body with much less exertion than Milo put forth; furthermore, that the bull could even run as it held itself upright. Yet the bull’s mind was not worth anything – just about like Milo’s.

In spite of such sentiments, popular esteem for athletic achievement was always high. Tales of Milo’s strength spread throughout the Greek-speaking world and, according to Herodotus (3.137), were even known at the court of Darius, the king of Persia, where the king himself supposedly held the name of Milo in great honour. One widely known story of his physical prowess told how he supported the crumbling pillar of a room in which followers of the famous philosopher Pythagoras were meeting. On this occasion, the intellectuals were very appreciative of Milo’s strength, for he single-handedly held up the ceiling while his friends managed to get out. Then he somehow managed to escape himself.<sup>7</sup> The story implies Milo’s aristocratic social status, and casts him as a follower of Pythagoras. Other evidence credits him with being the

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<sup>6</sup> Milo is here revealed as inferior to ‘the Gerenian horseman’ Nestor in Homer’s *Iliad*. When age compelled Nestor to acknowledge his withered arms and the failed strength of his limbs (cf. *Il.* 23.722), he moved on to equestrian sports and horse training with no less success than he had enjoyed previously in combat sports. Achilles honoured this success, and the king’s nobility of spirit, with a special prize at the funeral games for Patroklos (*Il.* 23.717). For further discussion, see Golden (1997) 332-3.

<sup>7</sup> Strabo, *Geography* 6.1.12. A strikingly similar, though ultimately tragic, story is told about another Olympic champion, Polydamas of Scotussa (Paus. 6.5.8-9).

philosopher's son-in-law, and even the father-in-law of the physician Democedes.<sup>8</sup> In 510 BC, when Croton met the powerful army of its neighbour Sybaris on the field of battle, Milo apparently presented himself wearing his Olympic crowns and dressed like Herakles, complete with lion's skin and club.<sup>9</sup> He proceeded to lead his fellow citizens to complete victory against a force three times their number. Sybaris was destroyed for all time soon after (Diod. Sic. 12.9.5-6).

Ultimately, our sources indicate that Milo's pride in his great strength brought about his downfall. The veracity of the evidence is difficult to assess, for it is surely informed by a theme running through Greek literature from the time of Homer about the fate that awaits men who rely solely or too much on their physical strength.<sup>10</sup> It appears that one day Milo was walking in the countryside near Croton, when by chance he came upon a withered tree into which wedges had been driven in order to split the trunk. Milo thought that he would finish the job himself, and so put his hands, and perhaps his feet, into the cleft in the tree trunk and tried to pull the trunk apart by his own strength. Unfortunately the wedges slipped out and the tree trunk sprang back together, holding him in an unbreakable grip. He was a prisoner of the old tree, an easy prey for the wolves which roamed the area in great numbers.<sup>11</sup> In rationalizing spirit, Harris (1964: 113) thinks that Milo was probably attacked and overwhelmed by a pack of wolves while travelling alone, and that his remains were found at the foot of a tree.

## 2. Was Milo defeated at Olympia?

The celebration of Milo in these stories is simultaneously accompanied by the theme of 'brawn versus brains,' which tends to demonstrate intellectual prejudice against Milo as the epitome of physical achievement. Consequently, it seems justifiable to ask whether this theme has contaminated or perhaps even generated the evidence that Milo suffered a defeat at Olympia.

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<sup>8</sup> Democedes: Hdt. 3.137; Guthrie (1962) 176.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Aelian (*VH* 2.24), who uses Milo as a foil to Titormus the Aetolian, in order to explain the proverbial phrase, 'a second Herakles.' For a contest between Milo and Titormus as to which of them could eat an ox with the greatest speed, see Ath. 10.412. For depictions of Herakles from the Archaic Period onwards, together with his lion skin and club, see *LIMC* 5/1.183-6.

<sup>10</sup> Hom. *Il.* 6.407: '(Andromache to Hector) O my dear, your strength will destroy you, and you have no pity for your infant child or for me.' Cf. Hom. *Od.* 1.44.70, where Odysseus outwits the Cyclops Polyphemos.

<sup>11</sup> Paus. 6.14.8; cf. Strabo, *Geography* 6.1.12 ('wild beasts'); Galen, *Exhortation* 13 [1.34-5 Kühn] ('starved'). Mark Golden (2004) 103 writes that he was 'as large and senseless a victim as the bull he had once consumed.'

There is certainly an air of confusion and contradiction about this evidence, in particular that of Simonides and Pausanias.

An immediate cause for suspicion is the fact that, in general terms, Milo is associated with victory, even invincibility, rather than defeat. He was by all accounts an incredible athlete, who became a half-legendary figure in his own lifetime. He seems to have overwhelmed his opponents through sheer physical size and strength. In addition to his victories at Olympia, Milo is said to have won 7 times in the Pythian Games at Delphi (once as a boy), 10 times in the Isthmian Games at Corinth, and 9 times in the Nemean Games (Paus. 6.14.5 [7 victories at Delphi, once as a boy]; Euseb. *Chron.* 1.202 [6 victories at Delphi]). Strabo (*Geography* 6.1.12) called him ‘the most illustrious of athletes.’ Pliny the Elder (*HN* 37.54) thought him to be ‘invincible in his athletic contests.’ Julius Solinus (1.76) likewise wrote that ‘he died the victor of all competitions.’ Milo’s fame has endured through the centuries. He is mentioned in literature as diverse as Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* (Act 2, Scene 3), Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, and Wyss’ *Swiss Family Robinson*. He features too in statues by the likes of Pierre Puget (1682) and Étienne-Maurice Falconet (c.1754), and in paintings by (e.g.) Joseph Benoît-Suvée (18<sup>th</sup> Century). There are clips on YouTube which feature him in BBC comedy skits emphasizing his brute stupidity. A popular energy drink, marketed especially for children, has long borne the name of Milo.

Enduring fame and generalizing statements about his invincibility are admittedly not proof against a defeat. The statements could perhaps be looked upon as throwaway lines, lacking in detail and specificity. Certainly, there is a basic confusion about the number and timing of Milo’s victories at Olympia. Mark Golden’s entry on Milo in his *Sport in the Ancient World from A to Z* (2004: 103) reads thus:

**Milon**, of Croton, wrestler, sixth century. The most famous of CROTON’S great athletes, Milon won once as a boy at Olympia (540) and then five or six times as an adult (536-520 or 516), losing in the end to TIMASITHEUS (I), a younger Crotoniate who knew enough not to come to close quarters with him and so wore him down...

This reflects the confusion about the number of Olympic victories (‘five or six times as an adult’), but is quite clear that Milo did eventually lose to his fellow-citizen Timasitheus. The

implication seems to be that the loss occurred in 516 BC, though the uncertainty is reflected quite properly by giving the dates as ‘536-520 or 516?’ What precisely is the evidence for the number of Milo’s victories and his supposed defeat?

Diodorus (12.9.6, ‘6 times’), Pausanias (6.14.5, ‘6 times, once as a boy’), and Eusebius (*Chron.* 1.202, ‘6 times’) are normally used to support the view that Milo won wrestling crowns at Olympia 6 times, including once in a boys’ match, viz. one victory as a boy, probably in the 60<sup>th</sup> Olympiad (540 BC) and five straight victories as a man (536-520 BC).<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Simonides claims that Milo won 7 times in an epigram (16.24) which either evokes or reproduces the inscription on Milo’s statue at Olympia:

Μίλωνος τόδ’ ἄγαλμα καλοῦ καλόν, ὃς ποτὶ Πίσῃ ἑπτὰκι νικήσας, ἐς γόνατ’  
οὐκ ἔπεσεν.

This is a beautiful statue of beautiful Milo, who, by the banks of Pisa, conquered 7 times and never once fell on his knees.<sup>13</sup>

This idea of 7 victories remains controversial, but at first glance it seems to derive from a contemporary, Simonides of Ceos (556-468 BC). Why is his clear assertion that Milo ‘conquered 7 times’ not generally accepted? The first reason stems largely from the authority of Denys Page, who did not believe that the vast majority of epigrams which have survived under Simonides’ name were in fact by Simonides. They were, he suggests, by a writer of the Hellenistic or Roman Imperial periods, viz. ‘Simonides.’ Page thought that no effort was made to collect Simonides’ works prior to the Hellenistic Period, by which time much had been lost or invented in Simonides’ name or could not be assigned. The epigram above, therefore, was written by someone who was not the real Simonides, did not have contemporary knowledge, and had made an error in ascribing 7 victories to Milo. Such a person might conceivably have found the number 7 appealing for its wondrous aura, like the lists of 7 Wonders, 7 Sages, and so on. Page (1981: 238), however, thought that there was an untrustworthy poetic tradition which had manufactured an additional victory for Milo. He cites another epigram (*Anth. Pal.* 11.316) which describes Milo arriving at Olympia, finding no competitor willing to stand against him, and thus

<sup>12</sup> A ‘boy’ at Olympia was a male between his 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> birthdays. See Harris (1964) 154-5.

<sup>13</sup> *Anth. Pal.* 16.24 (Loeb trans.); Tyrrell (2004) 105-6.

being declared the winner. When he was about to accept his award, however, he slipped. The crowd claimed that he should not be awarded the crown because he had fallen, despite there being no adversary. Milo replied triumphantly, ‘It is only one fall, not three. Let someone try to put me down for the other two.’ The aim in a wrestling match was to secure three falls against an opponent – a fall being defined as touching the ground with one or both knees. This anecdote seems characteristically suspicious, since yet again it tends to diminish Milo’s athletic achievement through the dubious fall. The triumphant reply – a rare display of mental dexterity from the renowned strong man – might even be another example of Milo’s hubristic reliance on his strength.

Aside from the authority of Page, the second major reason for rejecting Simonides’ evidence arises from the testimony of Pausanias (6.14.5-6) that Milo won 6 times, ‘including once as a boy.’ As mentioned above, Diodorus and Eusebius also credit Milo with 6 victories at Olympia, but they make no distinction between victories won as a boy or as a man, and thus might be referring either to victories won as a man or to their conceptions of the overall total. It is only Pausanias who seeks to clarify and only Pausanias who relates how Timasitheus fought Milo when the latter ‘came to Olympia to wrestle for the seventh time.’ Milo ‘could not beat Timasitheus, a fellow-townsmen, who had the advantage of youth, and who besides would not grapple with him.’ The account might carry the assumption of a defeat for Milo. If Pausanias has not simply become confused in his attempt to include the detail that Milo won once as a boy, perhaps this assumption of defeat is why Milo is said to have won only 6 victories (cf. Maddoli 1992: 47-8).

There are, at any rate, two mutually reinforcing assumptions commonly made by modern scholars, viz. that ‘Simonides’ was wrong and that Pausanias was right on the subject of a defeat for Milo. Yet it seems likely that the Simonides epigram deserves more respect than it has received. Scholarship on Simonides appears more willing these days to accept genuine Simonidean authorship for the poems collected under his name, especially in comparison to the hyper-scepticism of Denys Page. This is partly because scholars are now more willing to believe in a collection which pre-dates the Hellenistic period. David Sider, for example, has argued for a 5<sup>th</sup> Century collection, while Luigi Bravi thinks that a 4<sup>th</sup> Century collection underlies the Simonides poems which have survived. Admittedly, Bravi does not think that Simonides wrote *Epigram* 16.24 (quoted above). He continues in the vein of Page to see the hand of a later

epigrammatist. Yet if the later epigrammatist was writing at a time when a prose tradition of 6 victories had already become established, it is not easy to see (short of egregious error) why he should differ from that tradition, unless the alternative poetic tradition of 7 victories had likewise already become established. Sibelis thought that the best solution would be to amend ‘7 times’ (*heptakis*) to ‘6 times’ (*hexakis*) as a textual error, thereby making the epigram conform and sweeping away any thoughts about alternative traditions. If, however, as David Sider is inclined to believe,<sup>14</sup> Simonides did indeed write *Epigram* 16.24, it becomes possible to argue that the truth of 7 victories must have become confused in later times. Perhaps a reason for this lies in the practice of sometimes giving total victories and sometimes trying to distinguish between Milo’s victories as a boy and as a man. Totals of 7 and 6 would have resulted, and perhaps it proved difficult to keep the distinction between these two numbers apart.

Such reasoning tends to throw the onus back on Pausanias rather than Simonides, and it might be that the evidence of Pausanias is flawed. Certainly, Pausanias’ story is superficially plausible. Probably aged 40 or more (if he was 16 in 540 BC), Milo entered the 66<sup>th</sup> Olympiad in 516 BC. Also hailing from Croton in southern Italy, Timasitheus would have had plenty of opportunity to observe Milo in action. He might have decided before the competition began that he could not defeat the great champion at close quarters. Milo was too big and powerful. Thus he devised a new tactic, which involved dancing around and tiring out his bigger opponent. By using the technique known as *akrocheirismos* (‘high-handedness’, wrestling at arm’s length), Timasitheus evaded Milo’s crushing embrace and was not beaten (Paus. 6.14.5; Poliakoff 1987: 118; cf. Maddoli 1992: 47-8). But did he defeat Milo? The assumption that he was victorious is helped by parallels in other sports, in particular boxing, where the great Carian champion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD, Melancomas, won his contests through feints and constant motion, relying on superior stamina. His opponents eventually tired and could not continue, leaving Melancomas the victor.<sup>15</sup> A further parallel derives from heavyweight boxing at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when ‘Gentleman’ Jim Corbett defeated the physically stronger and heavier champion John L. Sullivan through a combination of scientific technique and evasive dancing. In so doing Corbett revolutionized the sport of boxing. So too in ancient Greece the ‘dancing’ style of wrestling caught on, and was commented upon, as though the change from brute strength to athletic

<sup>14</sup> On Page, *FGE* 25, see Sider’s review of Bravi in *BMCR* 2008.02.47.

<sup>15</sup> Dio Chrys. *Or.* 28.4, 28.5.10, 29; cf. Matz (1991) 70-1 (Melancomas), 66 (Iatrocles). I am grateful to Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides for these references.



technique was quite pronounced in the years following Milo's retirement. There is, however, a big difference between Milo's style being superseded and Milo himself being defeated by a wrestler using ringcraft and agility. The evidence might embody some confusion on this point. Perhaps the new style required a foundation story, in explanation of its success as the preferred technique of wrestlers in Milo's wake. It remains legitimate to ask whether Milo was in fact defeated.

There has not been serious discussion of the possibility of a draw, assuming for a moment that there is a historical basis to the story of Milo's bout with Timasitheus. Achilles, for example, declared both Odysseus and Ajax winners in their wrestling bout at the games for Patroklos (Hom. *Il.* 23.819) – another famous contest between 'brawn' (Ajax) and 'brains' (Odysseus). A draw with two winners would permit Simonides to claim 7 victories and no falls for Milo. Pausanias would also be right to say that Milo could not defeat Timasitheus, but wrong to assume Milo's defeat, if indeed he did so. The idea of a draw, therefore, has good potential for helping to explain the disparity between 7 and 6 victories. Yet such a reconstruction not only tends to historicize Homer in questionable fashion, it also tends to historicize Pausanias' account of the bout with Timasitheus rather than see it as part of a bigger literary tradition which rests on the theme of 'brawn versus brains.' Then again, Pausanias might have interpreted the bout between Milo and Timasitheus anachronistically, influenced by the achievements of (e.g.) Melancomas and Iatrocles of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD. Possibilities abound, but such questioning tends to make Pausanias' figure of 6 victories look increasingly shaky, whether considering anachronism or difficult calculations or assumptions about defeat or dubious ideas about separate 'poetic' and 'prose' traditions. Simonides' figure of 7 victories, in contrast, looks better than ever before.

A final point that arouses suspicion about Milo's supposed defeat is that the only mention of Timasitheus occurs in Pausanias. This seems a terribly disappointing yield from our sources, given Milo's international profile. Corbett became a celebrity, and the subject of books, documentaries, and films. Milo was surely greater than John L. Sullivan. Among modern athletes, Muhammad Ali seems the only figure of comparable stature, and this is partly because Ali's victory over George Foreman in the 'Rumble in the Jungle' in 1974 was in some ways like the victory of Timasitheus over a bigger, stronger, and more powerful opponent. Milo's defeat

(or even a draw) should have been headline-grabbing across the ancient world, and highly controversial, if it required a new technique. Why is there not more trace of it?

### 3. Conclusion

The tradition of Milo's defeat at Olympia should be questioned with more determination. Four arguments in particular seem relevant. First, the tradition accords with a common literary theme that consistently undermined Milo's prowess. Second, it involves calculations which have some degree of complication about them, given the mix of victories as boy and as man, and the need to manage the consecutive Olympiads carefully. Third, it might be contradicted directly by contemporary evidence, depending on one's attitude to the Simonides epigram, which at the very least deserves more respect than it has received until recently. Fourth, there is an increasing likelihood that Pausanias subtracted a victory wrongly, whether influenced by mathematical error, by the change in wrestling style, by the tale of Milo's failure to defeat Timasitheus, or even by the story that on one occasion the crowd voiced an objection to a walkover victory. In the end, Milo was admired as a victor (in war as well as athletics) rather than lamented as a loser. Years after his death, memories of Milo lingered at Olympia. As crowds watched the wrestlers dance with athletic grace around one another, the thought persisted that no Olympic wrestler ever born could have withstood the grip of Milo in his prime.

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