

Patrida

Peter Katsionis

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In writing this novel I rediscovered my “Greekness”. I encourage everyone, regardless of ethnicity to rediscover your roots. Every culture contains unimaginable wealth. Don’t let yours pass you by.

Peter Katsionis

A Guide to the Characters

PIROS freeborn son of slaves; raised and trained in Thebes in the pankration

DIOXIPPUS born a slave but trained to be a pankratiast; an innovator in the martial arts

FOTIS formerly a Helot slave for the Spartans, freed by and now serving Piros

DELIA Hebrew princess captured and sold into slavery, mother of Piros

TSAKA African medicine man of royal descent, captured and sold into slavery, father of Piros

KRUTZIOS master of Tsaka and later Delia

PHYLIA/IYEA twin sisters who were enslaved by Dionys

DIONYS master of Phylia, Iyea and Dioxippus

DEMOSTHENES Greek orator

ISOCRATES Greek orator

TYSOS/ HAGLIOS/HELEN athletes and friends of Piros

YEMESTOS/ XADROS Theban regulars who were part of Piros' scouting party

PAUSANIAS high-ranked officer in the King's Companions, friend to Piros

PHILIP Macedonian king

CLEOPATRA one of Philip's several wives, neice of the general Attalus

OLYMPIAS Philip's first wife, mother to Alexander

PATROCLUS a eunuch slave owned by Cleopatra

ALEXANDER son of Philip and Olympias, heir to the Macedonian throne

KATHOS a paid assassin used by many royal families

PETROS opponent of Dioxiippus in the Olympiad

PANTHEA daughter of Helot slaves

CLYTEMNESTRA mother of Cleopatra

MISTOPHANES one of the ten Hellanodikai, and the one responsible for the draw in the pankration

YIORGAKAS opponent of Dioxiippus in the ring

LYNCESTIANS brothers from one of the royal Macedonian families

Athens, 338 B.C.

Piros

The dust.

It swirled in fine circles, filtering the harsh brightness of the sun. To the spectators, the dust appeared to almost caress the contestants as it gently enveloped them.

Entangled within this ephemeral cloud, two men, strong, fierce warriors, struck, grabbed, twisted and kicked with a bestial fury. Yet as clenched fists exploded on the battered heads and naked bodies of the combatants, the dust, ever present, tenderly settled on the oil and sweat streaked torsos of the pankratiatists.

The surreal calm presented to the spectators contrasted sharply with the accelerating action within the dancing dust cloud. Slashing with a kick to his opponent's thigh, the taller man grimaced with pain as the other man dropped to one knee bringing his elbow axe like on the extended shin of the kicker. Then in a sweeping motion the shorter man swung his own leg and kicked out the other combatant's supporting leg, bringing him crashing to the ground. For the taller one, desperation raised the bile to his mouth as the growing panic struggled to gain control over the screaming muscles of his body. Relentless, the compact man seized the wounded leg of his opponent, twisting the ankle and forcing the taller man to slam, chest first onto the dry, hardened earth. The dust, to the spectators still a billowy, benign entity now seared the lungs and nasal cavities of the fallen pankratiatist. Unable to breathe, his vision a blurry morass of dust, tears and blood, Dioxippus thumped the ground with his right hand. At the sign of surrender, the compact man released his hold.

As both men slowly rose, the twenty or so spectators broke into laughter and good-natured banter. A few exchanged some coins as bets were settled. Slowly turning to leave, one old man looked over his shoulder at the pankratiatists, by now on their feet, and yelled out a disparaging epithet to the defeated Dioxippus. Despite being covered in bruises and welts with tendons and muscles stretched to the point of

snapping, Dioxippus felt the harsh sting of the insult far worse than the assault on his body. Embarrassed he turned to Piros.

To those who knew him, Piros exemplified the Greek ideal of mental and physical aptitude. Known for his understanding of the mechanics of the body, as well as the medicinal herbs that provided relief to all sorts of ailments, he was widely construed as a man gifted by Olympus. However, his extremely muscular physique, welded onto a broad, compact frame created an aura of raw, uncontrolled power around which even campaigned warriors trod warily. While known for his fanatical devotion to the Macedonian king, Philip, demonstrated in battle after battle, his skills as a soldier paled in comparison to his prowess in the pankration ring. Winner of two Olympiads and countless regional games, Piros was revered as the foremost athlete in the most important, most dangerous contest in Hellas. But reverence was tainted with fear, for Piros, son of slaves, had suffered torturing denigration at the hands of the Thebans. The furies from his tormented youth would rush forth whenever he felt angered or betrayed and to those who dared to challenge Piros these eruptions of violence were as unstoppable as a force of nature. For this reason, no man would risk suffering the wrath of a creature whose soul was said to be as black as his skin.

In sharp contrast stood Dioxippus. Younger by ten years but taller by six inches, the light skinned, blue-eyed teenager with the long, straw-coloured hair, was anything but fearsome at this moment. Slightly stooping, more out of shame than pain, his lanky frame appeared almost shriveled while his disheveled hair, matted with dust and oil stuck to his scalp in clumps. He resembled a whipped cur who had been tied to the back of a chariot and dragged through the dirty, overcrowded alleys of the slave districts. Yet, even in this state of discomfiture, he looked searchingly at Piros. To Dioxippus, the dark-hued soldier did not inspire the bowel-quaking paranoia of the other pankration trainees. Piros had taken a paternal interest in Dioxippus that in spite of the beatings he administered to the youth in the training ring, was truly born of love. And to Dioxippus, a boy trapped within a man's body, the knowledge, the dreams, the ambitions, even the violence, shared by the unlikely coupling with the freeborn son of slaves, was to him the embodiment of caring, guiding love.

Piros raised his coal-black orbs until they met with Dioxippus' sea-blue eyes. Staring, his face as expressionless as a slab of weathered granite, he let no emotion escape from the confines of his body. Dioxippus, by now desperate for a reaction, any reaction, parted his cracked lips as he struggled to maintain a deferential. But Piros remained motionless. No words issued forth from his lips. No encouragement. No disparagement. Just a gaze.

Then slowly, so slowly that Dioxippus did not at first notice any movement, the corners of Piros' mouth began to move, millimeter by miniscule millimeter upwards. Piros tried to fight the growing smile as a rush of emotions surged against the barriers erected by his disciplined mind. But enough of his good will had escaped to catapult Dioxippus across the training ring to Piros. Relieved, happy, proud, sad, frightened, Dioxippus would have found it impossible to catalogue his sentiments at that moment. Jabbering incessantly, the teenager assaulted the ears of his mentor. Piros, forcing himself to retain control of his demeanor was swept along, a leaf in a torrent of adolescent garrulity. His teeth flashed white; his head rolled back as he began to laugh, slowly at first but rising into a crescendo of guffawing. To Dioxippus, Piros' laughter was something almost spiritual as his affection was manifested so obviously.

"Master Piros. Master Piros! Have I done well today? Or are you moved to mirth by my ineptitude? Please answer me." Dioxippus' entreaties appeared to fall on deaf ears. "Master!"

Piros, who could be so violent, so angry, so feared, looked at his training charge. Why did he feel such a paternal instinct to a lad who was tall enough to look down on him? Why did he feel protective of this blonde slave? Why did he want to guide the body and soul of the person whom ten minutes earlier he could have crippled? These and other thoughts careened around in his mind.

"Calm, Dioxippus. You did well today. Come, let us bathe and I will review your efforts of today". And with that, Piros beckoned Dioxippus to the low retaining wall, where a balding, aged man stood beside a terra-cotta, oval-shaped pot. In his right hand, the old man held two square-edged instruments.

"Barba Fotis!" The old man grinned or grimaced (depending upon one's affection for teeth or in this case, lack of them) upon hearing Piros' call. Although his personal slave, Fotis was treated like a respected uncle, obvious by how Piros addressed him and it never failed to elicit a smile. Smiling was something that had been alien to him ten years earlier. As a Helot in Sparta, he had worked for the warrior elite of this military city-state. With no rights, subject to the predation of the Spartan youths, his life was a constant struggle for survival. But when the Macedonian king, Philip, started "negotiating" with the Greek city-states, the Helot slaves of Sparta, instead of banding together with their Spartan masters to repel this scourge from the north, aided the enemy by supplying foodstuffs, water and other supplies to the occupying armies. Although many remained in Sparta after the "assimilation", others such as Fotis were taken as slaves by the Macedonian army. Piros, who single-handedly savaged three Spartan soldiers who had discovered Fotis' complicity with the Macedonians and who were exacting revenge for it, took Fotis with him when the occupying forces left Sparta. To go from a life scratching ground as hard as the marble of the Acropolis merely to have his crops ravaged by Spartan youths eager to demonstrate their survival skills to their elders, to the life of a trainer with one of the finest pankratiasts of history was the fulfillment of a fantasy he was not even capable of having before Piros effected his rescue.

"Barba Fotis!" called out a now frustrated Piros.

Fotis snapped out of his reverie and sheepishly moved toward the two men. He handed Dioxippus one of the strigils, the sharp-edged instrument he would use to scrape off the oil and dirt from his skin.

The naked Piros sat down on the edge of the retaining wall with his back towards Fotis. Slowly, with the care of a barber performing a shave, Fotis scraped off the layers of the by now caking grime, from Piros' skin. After a sectioned area had been cleaned, Piros would lift the terra-cotta pot and with extreme care, further cleanse the now sensitive skin with cooling water.

As Fotis executed his duty, Dioxippus performed his own ablutions. Although a relaxing, serene activity, the young pankratiast was so tired from his earlier exertions that he had trouble controlling the path of the strigil. His fingers numbed, his lower back and legs rapidly stiffening

from sitting, and his bruises, blackening as the blood rushed to the battered areas further precluded the smooth operation of the edged tool. Consequently, he nicked himself, drawing blood and eliciting a yelp.

"Well, well, well, young warrior. You suffer the pain of the ring in silence but the slip of a piece of metal makes you cry out!" laughed the watching Piros. "What will your master say if I return you to him not only blemished but tattooed."

"My master seeks only to win the youth tournament at Marathon. I have been promised freedom with a victory at the next Olympiad but I feel there has been little progress. Today I failed to press my advantage," replied an obviously dispirited Dioxippus.

"Rather than dwell on your failings, focus on that which has proven successful. Your boxing skills are formidable. Your left hand in particular, is confounding, and my swollen cheeks will attest to that. As for your kicking, from where did you learn to raise your kicks above the waist. I have not seen or felt a kick such as the one you caressed my thankfully hard head with," continued the suddenly jocular Piros. "You are forcing me to study these aberrations of combat techniques with the soles of your feet."

"Yes, Master Piros, I did manage a successful blow or two but that last time..." Dioxippus grimaced at just the thought of the agonizing block on his shin. In fact, the throbbing started anew on that portion of his shin that was now covered by the blue-black of the burgeoning bruise. Reflexively, his hand moved to rub the sore spot. Looking up, he saw Piros swaying, ever so gently, the movement barely discernable. Piros had his eyes closed and was humming a chant. Leaning a shade forward, trying to hear the almost inaudible tune, Dioxippus momentarily forgot his pain as he stared at this man; this enigma whose fearsome reputation he had never been witness to but of which he was assured was true.

Fotis had now moved down to the legs of his master. The dark skin, glistening like slate as the water droplets caught the last rays of the afternoon sun, could not conceal the muscles or tendons. In fact, the internal forces driving Piros appeared to manifest themselves in the physical part of his being and these parts were ready to explode through

the thin barrier of his derma. Fotis, for all his age and experience could not help but marvel at the statue-like form of his master.

Piros, oblivious of the awe his student and slave had succumbed to, stood up as Fotis rinsed the last traces of the day's dirt from his body. Stooping, he picked up a rectangular cloth and a black, leather-braided belt and with a few quick motions, had created an ankle-length tunic. The chiton, a resplendent royal blue, dignified the fighter and in fact lent him the air of a scholar. And as befitting an athlete, he walked barefoot.

Dioxippus, not yet a man, and still a slave, dressed himself in an oft-washed basic white chiton that came down no further than the knees. He also walked barefoot as he turned to follow the leaving Piros and Fotis.

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows on the three men as they made their way up toward the city. The chaotic rush of humanity that crowded the narrow streets and alleys was conspicuously absent. Ensnconced in quiet, the city of Athens resembled more a glorious tomb than the vibrant, almost living thing it normally was. But as the three men negotiated the complex system of paths, lanes and thoroughfares, the muffled scratching of their bare feet on the dried-out, hardened earth was the only significant sound cracking the mantle of silence.

"The heat. It has driven everyone off the street," commented Fotis, to no one in particular.

"What? Oh, yes, you are right. The city sleeps," replied Dioxippus, he too to no one in particular.

Walking slightly ahead, to Piros, immersed in his own thoughts, the conversation between his charges was as the drone of insects, insignificant and inconsequential. He barely noticed that the Athenians had en masse decided to seek shelter from the sweltering heat. He barely noticed the way the receding sun coloured and reshaped the marble forms of the city's larger structures. In fact, he did not even notice how the Acropolis, high above the city, glowed in colours of gold, azure, ivory and scarlet, or how the Parthenon, the magnificent temple crowning the Acropolis, unmatched in the beauty and intricacy of its design, was even more glorious wearing a cloak stolen from the exploding lights of a prism. Piros was oblivious to all of this.

"Is he bewitched?" asked a concerned Dioxippus.

"No, young lion," answered Fotis. "He thinks of revenge." The old man looked concernedly at Piros then turned to Dioxippus. "I advise silence. His soul is possessed by a force from Hades. Come, we approach the road to your master's. He will be angered if we delay any longer. Leave Master Piros, he will walk until he can walk no longer then he will return to his villa." And with that, the old man and the young slave, turned from the main road. Glancing over their shoulders, they watched the dark shadows cast by the buildings wrap themselves around the black form of the fighter until he too was no more than a shadow.

Piros remembers...

Hard, calloused and so big they could cradle a melon in the palm. These were his father's hands. After so many years, his father's face had become an agonizing blur that drove him to tears as he, with tightly shut eyes, attempted to reconstruct in his mind's eye, the visage of the man he loved, even worshipped. But the hands, so unique in size and shape, he could never forget.

Piros had tried to erect obstacles to his past but his memory, like a lichen attaching itself to the rock it will eventually crack, refused to be subjugated. He had long ago realized that his parents' faces would never again be revealed to him. At times he had forced himself to forget. At other times he offered sacrifices to not only the gods of the Greeks but to the God of his parents, as he begged for one more last look at those faces he so cherished. Yet, only those hands, massive, powerful could he see. And it was not the dirt, or the fine, silvery dust that would line the cracks in his father's hands like fine sown seams that he would recall. To Piros, his father's hands were as soft as a newborn lamb's fleece. Those hands that could with a single downward blow of the bronze pick, reduce a rock the size of a man's head, to rubble, were remembered for the way they would caress his cheek, tousle his hair.

Other tantalizing flashes careened through his aching head at the memory of his father. Smells, colours, sounds united into a cacophony of faces, voices and images. Piros raised his hands to his temples as the struggle to remember shot bolts of pain into his brain. His eyes teared, and suddenly angered, his teeth bit down hard, catching the edge of his tongue and drawing the salty taste of his own blood. Hardly noticing he spit it out.

Now he could see what earlier had been a kaleidoscope of colour. Over there, by the far wall, he could see his mother Delia, a tiny, delicate woman with an almost coppery complexion. Her black hair, luxuriously long, was braided and arranged on her head in a circular pattern. Clothed in a long, flowing chiton, her arms bare and devoid of any jewelry, Piros' mother still presented an aura of confident pride.

Captured by Egyptians during an inter-tribal war, Delia had entered slavery as a young adult. Coming to Memphis in chains had been the ultimate humiliation for this daughter of a rabbi or holy man. Her diminutive stature had sparked a great deal of interest amongst the Greek, Persian and Phoenician traders and a life in a harem or brothel appeared imminent. Thus, it was with fear and trepidation that she observed the auction from her holding pen. Admittedly, she had been treated fairly well by her captors but that was almost to be expected in a world where anyone at anytime could be on the losing side of a war and have to serve the rest of their lives owned by another.

As Delia was led up to the auction block, the crowd shifted forward. Among the jostling, shoving mass of traders, soldiers and curious observers, stood two men: one, a wizened little man of obviously great age; the other, a black giant, proud and unyielding. Together they formed an odd duo. Even from the dais Delia spotted the two men. The black man stared right at her, implacable in his expression. She in turn lowered her eyes and turned her head to one side although she demurely observed him out of her peripheral vision.

"Come now! What do I hear for this lovely desert flower? She is of a size and delicateness rarely seen in this world of cows and other beasts. You, yes you, the Greek with the robes of red. What do you bid for this delicacy?" barked the round-bellied, shaven-headed Egyptian in perfect Greek.

The target of his jibe, a Greek trader from the island of Mykonos, gave Delia a long, searching stare. Then with his hand raised he flashed his first two fingers.

Responding immediately, the gnome-like man with the black behemoth for a companion thrust three fingers into the air. The big man beside him stood immobile, his face frozen. However, if one had looked a little closer at him, he would have noticed a barely perceptible arching of the right brow.

Suddenly excited by the competitive bidding the Egyptian trader's voice rose an octave as he continued his hyperbole.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen. Why bid so low? This gem will bring you pleasures unimagined in your native lands. Come now sir, are you willing to let this young thing fall into the hands of another," barked the trader to the scarlet-clad Greek. "You look like a man of good breeding and exotic tastes. Surely you can better the paltry sums offered thus far."

The Greek, succumbing to the entreaties of the Egyptian, uncurled four fingers and held them in front of his face. A murmur rose from the crowd.

Again, without hesitation, the little man flashed five fingers. The crowd's murmur dissolved into gasps, cries and protests.

The Egyptian, almost bursting with orgasmic delight, started sweating profusely. The drops on his head made a slow descent downwards leaving a silvery trail of moisture on the skin of the head and neck. Yet it went unnoticed as he again urged on the bidders.

"Now we have somebody who shows serious intent. Five hundred dinari is a price that is beginning to approximate the true value of this fine creature. You, friend Greek. Have I told you that this lovely girl is untouched by any man. Have I told you that she comes from a holy family where chastity and good manners are stressed above all else. Look at her. Yes, look at her closely. See how finely she is formed," described the Egyptian. He then reached over, grabbed the upper portion of her garment and attempted to tear away the bodice. The girl, diminutive, raised to obey men, nevertheless reared back then jerked forward to bite the grabbing hand. Almost instantaneously she kicked the shin of the trader.

The crowd exploded in laughter. The Egyptian snapped his wounded hand back and took a couple of hops on his unhurt leg. His first reaction was to beat the now thoroughly frightened girl senseless. But his mind raced ahead of his emotions and his sales instincts rendered a potentially harmful situation to his benefit.

"Yes, yes laugh my friends. It seems my princess of the desert intends to keep her treasures intact. Quality control such as this is impossible to find. I add another hundred dinari to the price from my own pocket!" yelled out the Egyptian.

The gathering had by now swelled to triple the proportions of the opening trades. But with the Egyptian's last comments the crowd was silenced.

Completely dumbfounded, Delia stood with her hands crossed over her breasts, staring out of the corner of her eye, at the man trying to sell her. She was completely confused as to his intent. Was he going to keep her? Was he asking an impossible price for a purpose? Who would get her? Both bidders were aged and appeared Greek. A harem seemed unlikely but a brothel...

Silence permeated the auction ring. Nobody seemed to know what to do, say or think. The Egyptian had raised the price to an unheard of level for a female slave. The Greek clad in red shook his head and abruptly turning his back on the podium, left.

The Egyptian was now sweating even more profusely. Little rivulets of perspiration streaked the oak coloured skin of the trader. He had taken a chance raising the price so abruptly. He wondered if the mass watching knew he was bluffing. Another trader may have been worried about losing a sale of this magnitude. But the Egyptian began to feel a heightening of his senses and he could feel the blood coursing through him as even his skin began to tingle with the adrenalin rush precipitated by the dealmakers' ultimate pleasure. Not the sale, not the girl, not the loss of the money made incursions into his mind-state. He wanted that crowd to know that he was controlling the situation; that he was the person responsible for bringing some life to this dreary port. At this instant, he felt omnipotent.

"Six hundred and fifty," a low voice spoke.

The people massed together looked around them, unsure of the identity of the speaker.

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