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A Concise History of the Martial Traditions of Blade in Greece

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Abstract

This article presents a concise research on the armed martial traditions of Greece, as evident in historical sources from Antiquity to nowadays. It is a rather neglected part of History, regarding bladed weaponry, training and conceptual aspects that have survived in modern times, through a military and folklore lineage.

Keywords: Martial traditions, Greece

Introduction

When referring to the martial traditions of Greece, what usually comes to mind is Ancient Greece and Olympic Games, especially regarding the phalanx military formation, the Spartans or the surviving boxing and wrestling sports, along with what is perceived nowadays as a Mixed Martial Art: the legendary Pankration ^[1]. Even with these well-known clichés, a lot of misunderstanding exists about the nature of those Ancient institutions. For example: Olympic Games were not an athletic competition, as it is nowadays, but a religious festivity in honor of God Zeus ^[2]; Pankration was not a martial art but a combative sport ^[3], since the original contemporary martial art was of a broader content, more adapted to survival in a battlefield and with an individualized training ^[4]. In this historical context, it is generally believed that the martial tradition (not only in Greece but in the entire Europe, as well) has a broken line of legacy ^[5]. This opinion is solely based on the lack of training manuals surviving prior to 1290 CE ^[6]. Nevertheless, the existence of manuals is not necessary in a massive living tradition that is exerted either as a military one or as folklore, which is the herein argument. In the former case, there is a continuous existence of a martial culture and a normal succession of states in Greece that trained warriors, continuously participating in wars ^[7]. Yet, no explicit manuals have been found, although it is rather obvious that combat-proven training curricula were frequently applied in battle. The lack of surviving manuals denotes nothing else but the existence of an oral tradition. In the latter case, folklore arts (including martial ones, like the Portuguese stick-fighting ^[8]) have been nothing but oral. Still, they exhibit a remarkable persistence in time, lasting for thousands of years despite the change of the religious context, like the Carnival ^[9], and especially when they are combined as in the war-dances ^[10]. Thus, the present research will demonstrate in a concise manner much indirect evidence that indicate the historical succession of a diachronic martial tradition, concerning the rather vanishing issue of bladed weaponry.

Presentation of Research

It is evident that for many centuries in the Classical Ancient Greek world, martial training had been massively widespread, for athletic and military use ^[4]. Even much earlier (17th century BCE), the armies of Egypt, Middle East, Greece and the rest of Europe used the same offensive and defensive weaponry ^[11], in the same more-or-less way. The preferred close-quarters offensive weapons had been spears, swords and knives, with blades of various length and shape ^[12]. In the early Hellenistic era (323 BCE – 330 CE ^[13]), Romans adopted the tactics of the Ancient Greeks, as they learned them from the Greek colonies of Southern Italy. The expansion of the Roman Empire around Mediterranean Sea caused persons of

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every nationality to enlist in the Roman Legions. The training of those Legionnaires emphasized the development of personal fighting skills^[14]. This martial tradition had been preserved to the Eastern Roman (alias Byzantine) Empire (conventionally until 1453 CE), which succeeded the previous political status.

The Byzantine era

An important element in the early Byzantine era, regarding the preservation of martial traditions, is evident by the historical example of General Belisarius (6th century CE), in many occasions^[15]. Just a typical one is the battle of village Chettos (559 CE), where the retired for almost ten years Belisarius had to defend Constantinople against king Zaverganis of the Koutrigur Huns, with his cavalry of 7,000 selected men^[17]. Gathering 300 of his volunteered veterans, 2,000 soldiers of the neglected Imperial Guard and 1,000 Thracian villagers in descent physical shape from the refugees, Belisarius defeated the Huns a few days later. The Huns lost 400 men killed, while the Byzantine army suffered three dead and quite a few wounded men. This example, especially regarding the training of the Thracian villagers, denotes a martial tradition based on the simplicity of fighting concepts. This simplicity that is also exemplified by the enlistment of villagers during the Medieval and Renaissance wars in Europe^[18], concerns the fighting skills that can be developed through the usage of ordinary tools, like axes or machetes. The continuous martial tradition is even more evident in Greece, during the late Byzantine era ("Latin") and beyond the fall of the Byzantine Empire ("Ottoman" era).

The Latin and Ottoman eras

After the 4th Crusade (1204 CE), most of Greece had been conquered by the Latin troops, being divided into small states by them. It remained so until the Ottoman Turk conquest (15th century CE), which lasted until the beginning of the 19th century CE in Southern Greece. Those were the eras of the historical emergence of Stratioti (14th century CE). They were bilingual horsemen (speaking Greek and Arvanitika), initially originating from the Northern region of Epirus, who served as mercenaries in the entire Southern Greece (and inhabited many regions) and abroad^[19]. They exhibited the finest Doric military traditions, they had been trained in acquiring martial skills since their childhood and they suffered minimum casualties in combat. Their training was characterized by their community martial customs, emphasizing both personal and group tactics based on the deception of the adversary, the evasion of an attack and the improvised technical response to a threat. Eventually, they formed unruly communities of the Ottoman era (15th – 19th century CE). These unruly areas were mostly located in remote and inaccessible mountainous areas, easy to defend against enemy attacks. Such an area was Souli (located in Southern Epirus), arising at the second half of the 17th century CE^[20]. The other two most notorious unruly areas had been Mani (located in Southern Peloponnese) and Sfakia (located in Western Crete), which they deserve a special commenting due to their long martial tradition that comes directly from the early Antiquity.

The unruly areas

Mani has a very long and well documented history of

independence, secured by its inhabitants, who had been fierce warriors^[21, 22]. Their martial heritage had been continuous until the second half of the 20th century CE. Cities of Mani are mentioned in Homer's Iliad ("Catalogue of Ships" that participated in the Trojan War). The last ones to conquer Mani had been the Ancient Spartans (800 BCE), who though respected the autonomy of the area, as did the Romans after them. During the gradual collapse of the Byzantine Empire, neither the Franks (1210-1260 CE) nor the Ottoman Turks (1460-1830 CE) succeeded any better in subduing the area, always suffering heavy casualties. The martial tradition of Mani had been so profound that women occasionally participated in combat (Greek War of Independence, 1821-1829 CE), with close-quarters weapons (scythes and long knives), as well. Alongside in the Byzantine era, Sfakia formed a self-government during the Saracen Arabs rule in Crete (824-961 CE), which remained respected after the restoration of the Byzantine rule. During the Venetian rule (1204-1669 CE), 27 rebellions broke out in Crete^[23], with eight of them within the first period (1211-1282 CE)^[24]. The situation during the Ottoman rule (1669-1898 CE) had been similar, while the usage of bladed weapons had remained very common, despite the wide introduction of firearms^[25]. Nowadays, the martial tradition of knife-fighting is still effectively retained in Crete^[26].

Modern Times

After the independence of Greece (1832 CE), the usage of bladed weapons remained very common in peace-times, either for vendettas (via knives)^[26] or for duels (via swords)^[27], the latter according to the rules of Tavernier^[28], until the beginning of the 20th century CE. The last extensive usage of bladed weapons in battlefield is observed in World War II, during the counter-attack of the Greek Army against the Italian one, in the Epirus/Albanian Front (1940-1941 CE). Both Infantries were engaged with bayonets^[29], which is the modern version of a spear, whenever ammunition run out quickly and the re-supply being difficult in a terrain without roads^[30]. There, legendary battles had been fought this way^[31], with the Greek Infantry always emerging victorious, due to the better martial training in close-quarters combat and the advantage of having longer rifles and bayonets than their Italian adversaries^[32].

Conclusions

A substantial part of the martial traditions of Greece have survived until modern times, used in wars or individually in peace times. The usage of historical weaponry, from the ancient times until World War II, has been retained either in the form of short blades or modified, as in the case of rifle & bayonet instead of a spear. The relevant martial training is still conducted in military campuses, but also as a folk tradition in local communities of Crete. The core curriculum of training is simple, based on more conceptual than formal aspects, including the deception of the adversary, the evasion of an attack and the improvised technical response to it, based on individual preference and abilities.

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