

UNDERSTANDING ANCIENT COMBATIVES: HOW DID DIOXIPPUS TAKE CORAGUS DOWN?

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This paper analyzes the descriptions of the takedown technique employed by Dioxippus against Coragus in their celebrated duel. Previous interpretations of the takedown technique are critiqued, and new translations of the primary sources are presented.

Accounts of a remarkable duel between the Athenian athlete Dioxippus¹ and the Macedonian warrior Coragus² are related by both Diodorus of Sicily (17.100.1–8) and Q. Curtius Rufus (9.7.16–22). Although there are some differences in the accounts, both essentially agree: during a banquet at which Alexander's favorites were in attendance, Coragus — having liberally partaken of drink — challenged Dioxippus to single combat. At the appointed time and place, Coragus arrived fully armed, his gear including sword, shield, javelin, and sarissa,³ while Dioxippus arrived naked and armed with only a club.⁴ Dioxippus dodged his opponent's javelin, shattered his sarissa with the club,⁵ and then took him down and subdued him before

¹ Diodorus describes Dioxippus as an athlete who had won a crown in the latest games (17.100.2); Curtius describes him as a celebrated boxer (9.7.16); and Athanaeus relates that he was a pankratiast (6.251). Since boxers, wrestlers, and pankratiasts were known to cross train and compete in one other's sport, there need not be any contradiction in reports that Dioxippus was both a boxer and a pankratiast. Dioxippus' takedown of Coragus indicates that he was an experienced grappler.

² *Corratas* and *Horratas* in the Latin texts.

³ The *σάρισα* or *hastamque sarisam vocant* mentioned here is probably not the extremely long, heavy, cumbersome infantryman's pike meant for two-handed use in massed formation, as such a weapon would be particularly ill-suited for single combat. Since Coragus is described by Diodorus as being among Alexander's *ἐταῖροι*, he may very well have been armed with a long cavalryman's lance that although shorter, lighter, and more maneuverable than the infantry sarissa would have appeared a veritable sarissa itself alongside a typical spear of average length. Commenting on the debated issue of the "cavalry sarissa," Manti 1983:78 states: "the cavalry lance is a sarissa compared to the dory, but simply a dory compared to the pike, which itself was often called 'the longer dory'." A B Bosworth was of the opinion that the accounts of the duel between Coragus and Dioxippus were evidence that the sarissa mentioned therein was "a light weapon that could be managed on foot with one hand." Cited in Markle 1978:491, n.43; Markle himself, however, takes a dissenting view.

⁴ Because Diodorus mentions that the physically imposing Dioxippus resembled Herakles all the more because of his club, iconographic representations of Herakles and his club may shed light on Dioxippus' weapon of choice, the *ῥόπαλον σύμμετρον* or *validum nodosumque stipitem*. Although later representations of Herakles often show him armed with an enormous cudgel that has to be wielded with both hands, representations from antiquity quite often show him armed with a studded, tapered, billy-club-size weapon that can be swung with one hand. Curtius has the club in Dioxippus' right hand, a garland on his head, and a mantle draped over his left side, a typical Heraklean pose.

⁵ The accounts differ on the shattering of the sarissa: according to Diodorus, Dioxippus shattered the sarissa when Coragus charged him with the sarissa already leveled, while Curtius has Dioxippus rushing in and shattering the sarissa before Coragus could pass it from his left hand to

he could draw his sword. This paper presents a fresh analysis of the method by which Dioxippus took Coragus down, correcting the misconceptions inherent in previous interpretations. Diodorus' account of the takedown and its aftermath (17.100.6–8) is treated first:⁶

μέλλοντος δ' αὐτοῦ σπᾶσθαι τὴν μάχαιραν ἔφθασε προπηδήσας καὶ τῇ μὲν εὐωνύμῳ κατέλαβε τὴν ἔλκουσαν τὸ ξίφος χεῖρα, τῇ δ' ἄλλῃ κινήσας ἐκ τῆς βάσεως τὸν ἀντίπαλον ὑπέσυρε τὰ σκέλη. ῥιφέντος δ' ἐπὶ γῆν ἐπιβὰς ἐπὶ τὸν τράχηλον τῷ ποδὶ καὶ τὸ ῥόπαλον ἀνατεινόμενος ἀνέβλεψεν πρὸς τοὺς θεωμένους.

Welles' well-known Loeb edition translation reads as follows:

but as he reached for [his sword], the other leaped upon him and seized his swordhand with his left, while with his right hand the Greek upset the Macedonian's balance and made him lose his footing. As he fell to the earth, Dioxippus placed his foot upon his neck and, holding his club aloft, looked to the spectators.

Miller's translation is very similar, except that Coragus' feet are *knocked* from under him:

but as he went to draw [his sword], Dioxippus leaped upon him, grabbed his swordhand in his own left hand, and with his other hand he upset his opponent's balance and knocked his feet from under him. As Koragos fell to the ground, Dioxippus placed his foot on the other's neck and, holding his club in the air, looked to the crowd.

And finally, Poliakoff's paraphrase closely follows Miller, except that instead of Coragus' feet being knocked from under him, his legs are *kicked* from under him:

Koragos reached for his dagger; Dioxippos, in the best Olympic form, grabbed Koragos' right hand with his left, and with his other hand pushed him slightly off his feet, then kicked his legs out from under him. Dioxippos completed his triumph by putting his foot on his opponent's throat while raising his club and looking to the crowd.

Immediately prior to this scenario, Dioxippus — club in right hand — had shattered Coragus' sarissa. Coragus was reaching with his right hand across to his left side to draw his sword, his left arm probably holding his shield up high in front of him for protection. According to the interpretations cited above, Dioxippus grabbed Coragus' right hand in his own left hand, and then with his right hand — the hand holding the club — he pushed or somehow otherwise managed to make Coragus lose his balance. The off-balance Coragus then fell or was made to fall by having his feet or legs knocked or kicked from beneath him.

his right hand, i.e., before it could be leveled. This discrepancy naturally raises the question of how well the descriptions of the takedown agree.

⁶ Greek text Fischer 1964 [1906]; translations Welles 1933; Miller 1979; Poliakoff 1987:98.

A closer analysis of the text, however, suggests a different kind of takedown altogether. The clearly delineated actions of Dioxiippus' left hand and right hand — properly understood — will be seen to lend themselves particularly well to a specific kind of takedown. His left hand *laid hold of* (κατέλαβε) the hand *or arm* (χεῖρα) that was drawing the sword, while his right hand — the hand holding the club — *tripped up the other's legs* (ὑπέσυρε τὰ σκέλη).⁷ Embedded within the clause describing the tripping up of Coragus' legs by Dioxiippus' right hand is the participial construction κινήσας ἐκ τῆς βάσεως τὸν ἀντίπαλον, citing the attendant circumstance that Dioxiippus *had already gotten his opponent off balance* when he tripped up his legs with his right hand. The other interpretations, however, mistakenly take the getting of the opponent off balance as a direct result of the action of Dioxiippus' right hand and take the ὑπέσυρε τὰ σκέλη as some kind of subsequent loss of footing instead of a direct tripping up of the legs by Dioxiippus' right hand.⁸

The questions that require clarification, therefore, are how Coragus was gotten off balance, and once gotten off balance, how Dioxiippus used his right hand to trip up the other's legs. Addressing the second question first, it would appear that since Dioxiippus was holding his club in his right hand, the club itself might have played a part in the tripping. From the position of a crouching tackle — right shoulder rammed into Coragus' abdomen — Dioxiippus would have been able to reach down behind his opponent with his right arm and hook his billy-club-like weapon around Coragus' hamstrings to trip up his legs. From that same crouching tackle, Dioxiippus would have also been able to cup his left palm over Coragus' right triceps just above the elbow to prevent him from drawing his sword.

The justification for these actions to have occurred from a crouching tackle is found in the description of Dioxiippus' *springing forward* (ἔφθασε προπηδήσας) to engage Coragus, the phrase rendered *leaped upon* in a couple of the cited interpretations. This study takes ἔφθασε προπηδήσας to mean that Dioxiippus lunged forward at Coragus in a crouching tackle, from which position he was able to lay hold of Coragus' sword arm with his left hand and to reach around behind him and trip up

⁷ *LSJ* cites this very expression as having the meaning of tripping up the legs.

⁸ While commenting on another text describing how a combatant's leg was "tripped out from under him" by a foot sweep, Poliakoff 1986:167–68 cites Dioxiippus' tripping of Coragus in passing as if it were also a description of a foot sweep: "In D.S. 17.100.7, ὑπέσυρε describes the way a pankratiast trips his opponent: κινήσας ἐκ τῆς βάσεως τὸν ἀντίπαλον ὑπέσυρε τὰ σκέλη." That Poliakoff 1987:98 understands the tripping to have been done by foot is later reinforced by his rendering of ὑπέσυρε τὰ σκέλη as "kicked his legs out from under him". Poliakoff, however, omits the crucial prepositional phrase from the beginning of the clause he cites above, τῇ δ' ἄλλῃ. The sentence in the clause reads τῇ δ' ἄλλῃ . . . ὑπέσυρε τὰ σκέλη, *and with his other hand . . . he tripped up his legs*. The intervening participial construction κινήσας ἐκ τῆς βάσεως τὸν ἀντίπαλον cites the attendant circumstance *that the opponent had already been gotten off balance* when Dioxiippus used his right hand to trip up his legs. The passage is decidedly *not* a description of a foot sweep; Coragus' legs were tripped up by the action of Dioxiippus' right hand. Moreover, those who understand Coragus to have been downed by a foot sweep must account for his failure to press the fight as best he could from his position of disadvantage; it is almost as if he simply lay there as a prop for Dioxiippus' theatrical posturing. Had he been picked up and slammed, however, as opposed to simply having his feet kicked out from under him, he very well could have been incapacitated to the extent that he was unable to press the fight.

his legs with the aid of the club held in his right hand. The collision of Dioxiippus with Coragus as he tackled him was what got Coragus off balance (κινήσας ἐκ τῆς βάσεως τὸν ἀντίπαλον), perhaps causing him to backpedal and to jackknife forward to keep from falling over backwards.

Although the cited interpretations suggest that Coragus *fell* as a result of whatever technique was employed against him, the text states that he was *thrown, cast, or hurled* to the ground (ῥιφέντος . . . ἐπὶ γῆν).⁹ That Dioxiippus was able to pose with club held high and foot on his downed opponent's neck while *looking up at the spectators* suggests that he didn't have to be concerned with an opponent still capable of offering meaningful resistance; moreover, no mention is made of Dioxiippus' other arm having to be involved in controlling Coragus. It would appear, then, that Coragus hit the ground with enough force to temporarily incapacitate him. The question now becomes that of how a man being tackled could be slammed to the ground with enough force to temporarily incapacitate him as opposed to simply being roughly bowled over backwards without the fight being taken out of him. The answer to this question is that from his crouched-over tackle — probably with Coragus jackknifing forward over him to keep from falling over backwards — the powerfully built Dioxiippus was able to lift Coragus off his feet and straighten up into a standing position with Coragus slung over his shoulder, a position from which he would have been able to deliver a devastating slam.

Those familiar with grappling technique will now recognize the maneuver executed by Dioxiippus as a variant of what is known as a *double-leg takedown* ending in a slam.¹⁰ This move can be initiated by the attacker's lunging forward in a crouching tackle and ramming his shoulder into the abdomen of his opponent. From the crouching tackle, the attacker reaches around with both arms and grasps the opponent's hamstrings. By continuing to drive forward while pulling up on the opponent's hamstrings, the attacker can lift his opponent off his feet and then straighten up into a standing position with the opponent slung over his shoulder. From that position, the attacker can then forcefully slam the opponent down onto his back, in some cases with enough force to render the opponent unconscious.¹¹ Because

⁹ In *S. Tr.* 780, ῥιπτεῖ . . . πρὸς πέτραν is used to describe Lichas' being fatally flung against a rock by Herakles.

¹⁰ The present writer wrestled in high school and later trained in Brazilian jiu-jitsu and judo, sports which all make use of the double-leg takedown.

¹¹ In the first twenty-two seconds of a mixed martial arts bout between modern day pankratiasts Frank Shamrock and Igor Zinoviev, Shamrock successfully attacked Zinoviev with a double-leg takedown, lifted him off his feet, and slammed him to the mat with enough force to knock him unconscious. (Ultimate Fighting Championship 16, New Orleans, March 13, 1998) This occurred on a padded surface designed to afford some degree of protection to the combatants; the possibility of being knocked unconscious would be much greater for combatants engaging on solid ground. The clash between Coragus and Dioxiippus seems to have been as short and decisive as that between Shamrock and Zinoviev, Dioxiippus' victory likewise the result of a similarly devastating slam. An ancient depiction of a double-leg takedown attempt appears on an amphora dating from the sixth century BC in the collection of the Museo Nazionale Tarquiniese, inv. no. 5654. The wrestler on the right is crouched over in a tackle, ramming his right shoulder into the abdomen of the wrestler on the left, his left hand reaching to grasp his opponent's right hamstrings. (Miller 2004:47, fig. 70; Poliakov 1986:180, pl. 6; 1987:45, ill. 39.)

the duel participants were both armed, Dioxippus had to modify the way he performed the double-leg. Dioxippus' modification of the takedown consisted of his using only one arm — aided by the club — to gain purchase on both his opponent's legs, the other arm left free to lay hold of the opponent's sword arm.

Curtius' corresponding account (9.7.21–22) will be considered next:¹²

Macedo gladium coeperat stringere, cum occupatum complexu pedibus repente subductis Dioxippus arietavit in terram ereptoque gladio pedem super cervicem iacenti inposuit stipitem intentans elisurusque eo victum, ni prohibitus esset a rege.

Rolfe's well-known Loeb edition translation reads as follows:

the Macedonian had begun to draw his sword, when Dioxippus seized him in his arms, suddenly knocked his feet from under him, and butted him to the ground; then snatching his sword from him, he set his foot upon the Macedonian's neck as he lay prostrate, and poising his club to strike him, would have crushed his defeated adversary with it, had he not been prevented by the king.

Yardley's more recent translation has Coragus' feet kicked, rather than knocked, out from under him:

the Macedonian had now started to draw his sword, but Dioxippus caught him in a bear-hug, quickly kicked his feet from beneath him and smashed him to the ground. Then, grabbing the sword, he set his foot on the neck of the prone Macedonian and, lifting his club, would have battered his defeated foe to death had he not been stopped by the king.

Once again, Coragus' feet are said to have been *knocked* or *kicked* from under or from beneath him when such an interpretation is not justified by the text. The meaning of *complexu pedibus repente subductis* is that he *suddenly had his feet pulled out from under him with a grasp*,¹³ terminology appropriately descriptive of a double-leg takedown or the modified double-leg takedown in which Dioxippus hooked his club arm around the back of Coragus' legs. Although the interpretations above have Coragus being seized or bear-hugged before his legs are taken out from under him, the structure of the Latin indicates that the seizing or clasping (*occupatum*) occurred after the reaping of the legs. This is consistent with the fact that before someone can be *struck violently to the ground* (*arietavit in terram*) by a slam finish to a double-leg takedown, he necessarily must have been taken off his feet prior to being clasped to his standing opponent's shoulder in preparation for the slam. And finally, the snatching away or grabbing the sword suggests the disarming of a dazed or unconscious opponent to make sure he doesn't have a weapon at hand should he unexpectedly recover and try to resume the fight.

¹² Latin text Hedecke 1912; translations Rolfe 1946; Yardley 1984.

¹³ The meaning of *subduco* is not to knock or kick, but rather to pull up, pull from under, or the like; *OLD* has "to pull away (a person's feet) from under him," citing this very passage.

In view of the foregoing analyses, the texts may be translated more accurately as follows:

But as he was about to draw his sword, the other had already lunged forward and with his left hand laid hold of the arm drawing the sword and with the other — having gotten his opponent off balance — tripped up his legs. And setting his foot upon the neck of the one who had been slammed to the ground and raising his club, he looked up at the spectators (Diodorus).

The Macedonian had begun to draw his sword when Dioxippus suddenly pulled his feet from under him with a grasp, seized him, and slammed him to the ground.¹⁴ And having snatched away his sword, he placed his foot on the neck of the prostrate one, raising his club and about to finish off the defeated one right there had he not been prohibited by the king (Curtius).

Although the primary sources read somewhat differently, each complements the other in describing a kind of double-leg takedown culminating in an incapacitating slam. The accounts may have a common origin in the lost history of Cleitarchus, redactors later condensing the material somewhat differently.

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¹⁴ The perfect passive participial construction — “the one seized, his feet suddenly having been pulled from under him with a grasp” — has been rendered into past active for smoother reading in translation.