

# Single Combat

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## 1. Introduction / definition

‘Single combat’ describes the conflict between two adversaries and, in the narrower sense, the struggle between a human and another living being that either directly involves physical force or that occurs indirectly through the application of individually usable tools or accessories. Single combat (sometimes also referred to as ‘duel’) needs to be distinguished from mass and team combat, which, just like war, can be understood as “nothing but a duel on a larger scale” (Clausewitz). Athletic and martial, armed, violent and physical, regulated and spontaneous conflicts, as well as the (ritualised) duel, are all practices of single combat. As one form of agonal conflict, single combat can be associated with [heroizations](#), if the combatant who initially appears weaker prevails and thereby achieves the extraordinary, if he or she is acting in the interests of a community and/or is [adored](#) as a [hero](#) (because of that). In addition, single combat in itself can be regarded as a heroic practice. As a [heroic deed](#), single combat is a persistent topos and appears as a practice and a subject portrayed in various [media](#) since the time of the early advanced civilisations in the Near East, in ancient Greece and Rome, in the Middle Ages and in the modern period (in the latter primarily in the form of the ritualised duel). (vdH)[\[1\]](#)

## 2. Antiquity

### 2.1. Literature review

Scholarship on the subject of the duel hardly acknowledges ancient examples of single combat and lacks a summary overview of its forms and functions in antiquity.[2] For the Bronze Age, Gilgamesh's struggles have garnered attention most of all, as last summarised by Steymans 2010.[3] Regarding the visual culture of that Age, the especially frequent 'animal combat scenes' (combat between a man/hero and an animal) have been explored.[4] For ancient Greece, there is intensive research on battle scenes and their typology within the [Homeric epics](#).<sup>[5]</sup> These studies discuss the relation of typical scenes of single combat to notions of the past,<sup>[6]</sup> to the establishment of the Greek hoplite phalanx as the predominant form of mass combat from the 8th/7th century BC onward,<sup>[7]</sup> and to ancient warfare within a greater chronological framework.<sup>[8]</sup> Literature on Virgil's *Aeneid* emphasises not only its successorship to Homer, but also its particular reference to the Roman tradition of the *spolia opima*, i.e. the enemy field commander's weapons won in single combat.<sup>[9]</sup> In addition, instances of single combat have been characterised as an archetype of Indo-European heroic epic.<sup>[10]</sup> Udwin 1999 sees in them an identifying feature of a premodern 'epic culture'<sup>[11]</sup> going beyond the literary. However, too little attention is given to the fact that literary sources do not necessarily reflect historical reality or even mentality. Complementing Livy's recounts of single combat in Roman history, Oakley 1985 has outlined the historical practice of formalised single combat in the army of the Roman Republic and, in brief, that of Greece and other cultures.<sup>[12]</sup>

For visual records of the 2nd millennium BC in Minoan and Mycenaean Greece, Vonhoff 2008 has discerned that the superior fighter and victor, either on foot or in a chariot, became a common stereotype in images of single combat.<sup>[13]</sup> Combat scenes in imagery from the early period of Greek history in the 8th century BC have been studied systematically,<sup>[14]</sup> with particular attention given to those in the extensive corpus of paintings on Attic pottery of the 6th and 5th centuries BC.<sup>[15]</sup> Even in the context of more extensive scenes of mass combat from Greek mythology and everyday life, a continuity of the Homeric-aristocratic model of armed single combat, that can be described as anachronistic, can be seen lasting through to the 5th century BC. This has been interpreted as a sign of an idealising or heroizing representation of combat that emphasised individual experiences, the capability of the individual and the 'Homeric' habitus in contrast with mass combat.<sup>[16]</sup>

More recent studies examine motifs of [violence](#) and superiority in portrayals of combat from the 6th and 5th centuries BC<sup>[17]</sup>, as well as the visual formulae found in images of battle (sometimes also resolved in single combat) from the Hellenistic period and Imperial Rome, all within their ideological contexts.<sup>[18]</sup> Research on sporting bouts in Greek antiquity<sup>[19]</sup> and on gladiator fights in Rome<sup>[20]</sup> is extensive. (vdH/Tilg)

### 2.2. Phenomena and forms of (re)presentation

#### 2.2.1. Practices

Antiquity did not know the modern concept of the duel (of honour). Single combat was either, as is often the case in Greco-Roman epics, integrated as one episode into a war scenario, or, as in the Babylonian-Assyrian Gilgamesh epic or in the Indian Ramayana epic, incorporated into the [narrative](#) of a hero's adventurous life. As a historical practice of aristocratic combatants, it likely played a certain role in military conflicts before the introduction of mass combat techniques, such as the hoplite phalanx in ca. 700 BC.<sup>[21]</sup> While it quickly disappeared thereafter in Greece – outside of athletic agonistics – with few exceptions (cf. [2.2.3. Visual culture](#) below), it persisted in Rome until the

end of the Republic as a formalised ritual in which ambitious fighters could earn their military spurs.[22] Although still significantly elaborated in works of literature, such as in Virgil's *Aeneid*[23], there are substantially fewer accounts of the practice of *spolia opima*, in which a Roman military leader removed his equally high-ranking opponent's armour in single combat, thereby ending the war. The bitterly waged civil war and the diminishment of aristocratic individualism due to the subsequent Principate essentially ended the tradition of single combat in the Roman army.[24]

There likely were military single combat practices also among other peoples. Diodorus (*Bibliotheca historica* 17.6) recounts how Darius excelled among the Persians as a candidate for the royal throne through a successful bout of single combat with a representative of the enemy army. According to Tacitus (*Germania* 10.3), the Germanic peoples held contests of single combat between one of their best fighters and a prisoner from the party waging war against them in order to prophesy on the further course of the war. Gregory of Tours (*Historia Francorum* 2.2) reported in the 6th century AD that the Vandals and Alemanni invading Spain resolved their conflicts over territory in single combat.

Historical practices of single combat in a wider sense also included the gladiatorial system and athletic competitions. Roman gladiator bouts were orchestrated as ritualised single combat; in the Greek East of the Roman Empire, gladiators were often compared with mythical heroes.[25] In sport, single combat was typical in wrestling, boxing and the pankration. The heroization of athletes precisely of these disciplines is common.[26] (vdH/Tilg)

### 2.2.2. Literature

In literature, the heroic epic is the typical [genre](#) for the portrayal of single combat. As West 2007 writes, “[n]othing is more characteristic of heroic narrative than accounts of armed encounters between individuals”.[27] In between the 3rd and 1st millennia BC, single combat was a common part of the narrative repertoire in the early advanced civilisations of Egypt, the Levant, Anatolia and Mesopotamia.[28] Exceptional single combat victories over dangerous animals or hybrids were attributed to rulers most of all. Before he becomes king of Judah, young David, for example, kills the military leader and giant Goliath with a sling (1 Samuel 17). In the Gilgamesh epic, passed down since the 3rd millennium BC,[29] the eponymous king of Uruk, together with Enkidu, defeats the giant guardian of the cedar forest, Humbaba, first in physical wrestling (tablet V 125-127), then through a sword thrust (table V 261-267). Like a butcher, he kills the Bull of Heaven through a sword thrust to its neck (tablet VI 139-146), which had been dispatched by the goddess Ishtar and sent masses of Uruk's youth to their deaths (tablet VI 119-127). He overpowers lions with an axe and a sword (tablet IX 9-18). His human helper Enkidu, on the other hand, he confronts in a barehanded athletic agon (tablet II 100-115). Homer's epic *The Iliad* (8th/7th century BC) often depicts the heroes in mass combat (see [Homeric heroes](#)). However, these scenes are consistently resolved in single combat (Greek: *monomachia*),[30] highlighting the outstanding achievements of individual warriors (Greek: *aristeia*, from *aristeuein* for “to be the best, to excel among others”; the concept entered descriptive philological vocabulary as ‘*aristeia*’ for a typical element of epic narrative).[31] Single combat therefore seems to outshine historical contemporary fighting techniques, which allows the agonal, individual capabilities of the heroes to stand out.[32] Due to its presence in Homer's works, single combat also takes on heroic features.[33] Without exception, the opponents are identified by name and individually characterised. They often explicitly challenge each other on the battlefield and engage in dialogue – in the exceptional case of Glaucus and Diomedes (*Iliad* 6.120-232), this leads to the two adversaries discovering their common ancestry and abandoning their fight. Except for more or less coincidental encounters on the battlefield, single combat can also be held during lulls in the fighting under certain formal conditions. In the *Iliad* 7.54-91, Hector for example calls on the Greeks to send out their bravest fighter to engage him in single combat. The subsequent fight with Ajax ends undecided and has more the character of a tournament than that of a deciding act. In *Iliad*

3.67-75, however, Paris and Menelaus plan a genuine deciding bout of single combat when they agree that the victor would receive Helena and thus win the Trojan War. The agreement is validated with sacrifices and oaths of both parties, but ultimately nullified through Aphrodite's intervention. The gods also intervene in other incidents of single combat in Homer's *Iliad*, which is similar to an extent with the mediaeval bouts of single combat that were held as an ordeal by battle.

The Homeric individualisation of battlefield fighting and the resulting focus on scenes of single combat becomes a model for the Greco-Roman epic overall, such as in Virgil's *Aeneid*, where in book 12 Aeneas avenges the killing of Pallas in a final act of single combat with Turnus similarly to Achilles avenging the [death](#) of Patroclus in single combat with Hector. In Virgil's *Aeneid* however, the gods do not intervene in the bouts of single combat, whereas in the *Iliad*, Athena in human form dissuades Hector from fleeing and allows him to accept the challenge of single combat and thereby his downfall. There are individual examples, such as Lucan's *Bellum civile* concerning the Roman civil war written during the Neronian period, that privilege the collective and anonymous portrayal of battle scenes. On the one hand, these are fed by historiographical traditions and/or, on the other hand, serve a deliberately anti-heroic stance, as is the case especially in Lucan's work.[\[34\]](#) Against this background, projecting single combat successes onto historical ruler figures constitutes hero approximation in epic form: Aristobulus flattered Alexander the Great by describing his victory over the Indian prince Porus as single combat (Lucian, *quomodo historia conscribenda sit* 12); Alexander survived the Battle of Granicus reportedly only because he was successful in single combat (Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 17, 20, 3-5), and even a decisive single combat with the Persian king Darius has been postulated (Plutarch, *Alexander* 20, 4-5).

In mythology, single combat against wild monsters or exorbitant individuals is a standard motif, as in the adventures of Heracles, Theseus, Bellerophon or Perseus. Finally, a particular variation of literary single combat is the oratorical debate and poetic duelling (see Froleyks 1973 for a general overview). Such verbal single combat was held as early as in the *Iliad*, for example in the initial conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles over the prisoner of war, Briseis (1, 121-187; 223-244; 285-303).[\[35\]](#) Later, the formalised verbal *agones* in drama, especially in Euripides,[\[36\]](#) the song competitions of bucolic shepherds in Theocritus (*Idylls* 5, 6, 8, 9) and Virgil (*Ecloques* 3, 5, 7), and the satirical oratorical debates in Lucian became famous.[\[37\]](#) The anonymously written *Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi* (The Contest of Homer and Hesiod), the surviving version of which dates from the imperial period, imagines a poetry competition between the oldest Greek poets and thus contributes to their heroization. (vdH/Tilg)

### 2.2.3. Visual culture

Pictorial art has shown the Egyptian pharaoh primarily as a singular victor over enemy groups.[\[38\]](#) In Mesopotamia and the Levant, starting in the 3rd millennium BC, the victorious – oftentimes armed – single combat of one or two men over a human or animal opponent ('animal combat motif') was a standard motif ('contest scene'), primarily in glyptics (cylinder seals), but also in reliefs.[\[39\]](#) While Gilgamesh might be meant in many cases (especially in 'triads' with two victorious figures: fig. 1), the corpus – primarily of animal combat scenes – is large and the names of the combatants are not known.[\[40\]](#) In Minoan and Mycenaean Greece, scenes of single combat waged on foot, using chariots or while hunting appeared in various pictorial media (fig. 2).[\[41\]](#) In Assyria in the 1st millennium BC, the much older lion combat motif gained prominence.[\[42\]](#) The vast number of images shows the legitimising function of displaying one's power through a victory in single combat even for rulers of the Bronze Age and the early Iron Age. In the 8th century BC, Athens' elites used scenes of mass combat to decorate their representative ceramic gravestones.[\[43\]](#) At the end of the 8th and in the 7th century BC, the number of depictions of single combat rose in different pictorial media. Images of lion combat (fig. 3) took on an extraordinary character given that lions no longer lived in Greece and had become part of the Heracles myth. At least by the 7th century BC, and then in the 6th and 5th

centuries BC, the single combat scene was standard for the depiction of conflict both for mythical heroes such as those of the Homeric epics, like Heracles (fig. 4) and Theseus, as well as for generic or everyday-contemporary conflicts that often blurred with mythical battles (fig. 5).<sup>[44]</sup> Although in reality warfare was already dominated by the mass phalanx and the collective cavalry battle, there are hardly any accounts of their depictions.<sup>[45]</sup> The term *Promachos* ('frontline fighter') was used as an extolling appellation for combatants (*Inscriptiones Graecae* I<sup>3</sup> no. 1240). Even on funerary monuments, such as the Dexileos relief (394 BC), the deceased appears as the victor of a single combat bout despite having fallen in a battle (fig. 6).<sup>[46]</sup> All of this shows an anachronistic, heroizing perspective focused on the achievement of the individual,<sup>[47]</sup> even though the victor's power and the loser's status could have been portrayed in manifold ways.<sup>[48]</sup> It can additionally be understood as the expression of a more individualised than collective experience of combat.<sup>[49]</sup> Even some depictions of battle and hunting scenes of Alexander the Great and Roman emperors were – at least compositionally – realised as the confrontation between the 'frontline fighting' ruler and various opponents, for instance in the 'Alexander mosaic' (fig. 7)<sup>[50]</sup> or on Roman coins and 'state reliefs' (fig. 8).<sup>[51]</sup> The ruler was heroized in that he was visually ascribed the central and deciding act in mass combat. There are also extant images of sporting bouts from Egypt and Mesopotamia on seals. The Greco-Roman visual tradition is similarly vast in this respect (fig. 9);<sup>[52]</sup> however, heroizing traits are not generally associated with it. The prevalent athletic character of images of single combat, however, gave the single-combat-like visualisation of martial and mythical events an agonal element.<sup>[53]</sup> (vdH/Tilg)

#### Fig. 1 - 9: The visual culture of single combat in antiquity



Fig. 1:  
**Fight against a mythical monster (Gilgamesh and Enkidu against Humbaba?)**

stone relief from northern Syria, 10th century BC, basalt, height: 63 cm, Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, Inv.-No. 21.18.

Source: [The Walters Art Museum](#)  
Licence: [Creative Commons Zero](#)



Fig. 2:  
**Single combat**

seal found in Grave III of Grave Circle A (Mycenae), 16th century BC, gold, 1.8 cm x 1.2 cm, Athens, National Archaeological Museum.

Source: [Arachne / Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut](#)

Licence: [CC BY-NC-ND 3.0](#)



Fig. 3:  
**Depiction of lion combat on a pottery tripod**

ca. 740 BC, pottery, height: 17.8 cm, Athens Kerameikos Museum, Inv.-No. 497.

Source: [User:Giovanni Dall'Orto / Wikimedia Commons](#)

Licence: Attribution only



Fig. 4:  
**Heracles fighting the Nemean lion / head of Athena**

silver stater from Heracleia in Lucania, ca. 400 v. Chr., silver, diameter: 2.1 cm.

Source: Franke, Peter R. / Hirmer, Max: Die griechische Münze. Munich 1964: Hirmer. Nr. 257.

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(German Act on Copyright and Related  
Rights, Section 51 / § 51 UrhG)



Fig. 5:  
**Hoplite fighters with Athena and Hermes**

Attic red-figure amphora, ca. 520 BC, pottery,  
height: 57.2 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Inv.-  
No. G 1.

Source: [User:jastrow / Wikimedia Commons](#)  
Licence: Public domain



Fig. 6:  
**Grave relief of the cavalryman Dexileos,  
Dipylon cemetery (Kerameikos)**

394/3 BC, pentelic marble, height: 2.21 m,  
Athens, Kerameikos Museum, Inv.-No. P  
1130.

Source: [User:ΤΧρήσσης Templar52 / Wikimedia Commons](#)  
Licence: Attribution only



Fig. 7:  
**Mosaic depicting the battle of Alexander the Great against the Persian king Darius III from the Casa del Fauno in Pompeii**

2nd century BC copy of a Hellenistic Greek painting made during the late 4th / early 3rd century BC, mosaic/stone, 5.13 m x 2.72 m, Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Inv. No. 10020.

Source: [User:Magrippa / Wikimedia Commons](#)

Licence: [Creative Commons BY-SA 3.0](#)



Fig. 8:  
**Relief depicting Hadrian hunting a boar**

ca. 135 AD, marble, diameter: 2.20 m, Rome, on the Arch of Constantine.

Source: [User:Sailko / it.wikipedia.org](#)

Licence: Public domain





Fig. 9:  
**Pankration (wrestling) with adjudicator**

Attic black-figured amphora awarded as a prize to the winner of the Panathenaic Games, 332/1 BC, pottery, height: 77 cm, London, The British Museum Inv.-No. 1873,0820.370.

Source: [Trustees of the British Museum](#)  
Licence: [Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)

### 3. Perspectives for future research

A systematic exploration of forms, functions and traditions of single combat in ancient cultures is lacking.[54] Such a study would need to ask most of all whether and if so how the heroizing character in Greek images and texts can be connected to manifestations of single combat in early advanced civilisations, and what role traditions or references played in making those connections.[55] For Greek images of single combat, there is now consensus on their heroic character, but it is unclear how heroization, individualisation and the realisation of each contemporary combat experience interrelate in those heroic depictions.[56] In addition, we need more studies of the reception history of ancient portrayals of single combat primarily with regard to the development of the duel in the modern period. Although gladiator fights have been referred to as models for the modern duel,[57] a more general focus on single combat – as documented and dominant since the Homeric epics – appears to be formative here. That focus is applied because in most cases the point is to single out the agonal in the achievement of the individual and not of the **collective**. (vdH/Tilg)

### 4. References

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- 1 Fight against a mythical monster (Gilgamesh and Enkidu against Humbaba?), stone relief from northern Syria, 10th century BC, basalt, height: 63 cm, Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, Inv.-No. 21.18.  
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