

The pancratiasts Helix and Alexander on an Ostian mosaic

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Near the gate of Ostia which archaeologists call the "Porta Marina" stands a tavern, which for its part is known as the "Caupona di Alexander". The tavern does not get its name from an owner, but from one of its mosaics. This shows two naked athletes on the point of fighting (fig. 1). Each is shown essentially in the same posture, with right arm raised above his head and the left extended towards his adversary. The one on the right is the heavier of the two, with massive, muscular body, and also has on the back of his head a spiky crest, the so-called *cirrus* often seen in representations of athletes in the Roman period; to a modern eye it recalls the "oicho" or ginkgo-leaf hairstyle of sumo wrestlers. Between the two athletes is a palm, the usual symbol of victory. Above them are two names separated by a small space, ALEXANDER HELIX (the L of "Helix" is indistinguishable from an I). When the mosaic was first discovered, the two names were taken to belong to a single person, and the building was dubbed the "Caupona di Alexander Helix." But G. Becatti, in his definitive publication of the mosaic, observed that the two names must designate the two athletes, Alexander and Helix, and the current guide to Ostia more accurately calls the building the "Caupona di Alexander."¹ The room in which the mosaic was laid belongs to the second half of the 2nd c., but the mosaic itself was installed later, when the building was converted from a shop into a tavern. Judging by the artistic style and the letter-forms, Becatti put it in the "first half of the third century, between 210 and 235."²

Alexander and Helix are clearly some type of "heavy" athlete, but their precise classification is not easy. A succinct description of the three types of such athlete is given by Ambrose of Milan: "There are some who wrestle in a kind of simple and legitimate contest, and compete merely by interlocking their bodies, but do not practice hitting, and these are called 'wrestlers.' There are others who join bloodshed and the throwing of dust with bodily strain, to whom every kind of blow is permitted, and these they called pancratiasts (*pammacharii*), since they have the right to use all injuries and blows again one another. There are others who compete with boxing-gloves (*caestus*) and whose heads are brutally lacerated; these are called boxers."³ The difference between these three types is well shown in another mosaic of Ostia, from the Baths of Neptune (fig. 2). On the bottom left are two boxers, with their hands and forearms enclosed in the leather thongs of the *caestus*; to the right is a pair of pancratiasts, one of them standing with his fists still clenched, no doubt from the punch with which he has just felled the other; above is preserved one of a pair of wrestlers, who leans forward with his hands splayed, seeking a hold on his adversary.⁴

1 Mosaic: G. Becatti, *Scavi di Ostia IV: Mosaici e pavimenti marmorei* (Rome 1961) 205-7 no. 391, with pl. CXI (= fig. 1 here). *Cirrus*: Saglio in *Dar.-Sag.* I 520 b; B. Gassowska, "Cirrus in vertice – one of the problems in Roman athlete iconography," in *Mélanges offerts à Kasimierz Michalowski* (Warsaw 1966) 421-27; M. F. Squarciapino, "Nuovi mosaici ostiensi," *RendPontAcc* ser. 3. 58 (1985-86) 106, 107, 112. Sumo-wrestlers: P. L. Cuyler, *Sumo: from rite to sport* (New York and Tokyo 1979) 139, "a small circle is shaved on the crown of the head, and the hair is pulled back tightly, tied, and doubled forward in a neat queue, fanning slightly in the very front." In general, C. Pavolini, *Ostia* (Guide archeologiche Laterza; Rome 1983) 178-79.

2 Becatti, *Mosaici* (supra n. 1) 205.

3 Ambrose, *Explic. Ps.* 36, 55 (Migne, *PL* 14.1040-41; CSEL 64.112), cited by L. Robert, *Études épigraphiques et philologiques* (Paris 1938) 90. On these terms, M. Poliakoff, *Studies in the terminology of the Greek combat sports* (Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 146, 1982) 7-19.

4 Becatti, *Mosaici* (supra n. 1) 52 no. 72 with pl. CXI (= fig. 2 here).