

The apene <contest> is neither imposed by ancient tradition, nor it brings dignity; and there is an old curse on the Eleans even when the animal enters the country. The apene was similar to the synoris, but with mules instead of horses (Pausanias 5.9.2)

'On a white chariot drawn by four mules / With jewels made of silver...'
(Konstantinos Kavafis, *In front of the Statue of Endymion*)

13. THE APENE MULE-CART RACE: A UNIQUE ANCIENT OLYMPIC SPORT

In the early 1990's, I was amused to read of two American ladies, who trained their mules in dressage and were--wrongfully--not allowed to compete against horses. They persisted in the face of opposition and finally achieved their goals. Officials of the US Equestrian Federation reversed their decision and authorized the mule-stubborn riders to participate in horse dressage championships. The two amazons were right, of course. There is no national or international rule, which stipulates that only horses can be entered in official or unofficial events of any equestrian discipline. What is more, the mule, a true equine *hybrid*, was actively involved in Olympic contests as far back as 2,500 years ago. The *apene* mule-cart race was introduced at the 70th *Olympia* of 500 BCE and was won by Thersias, a mule driver from Thessaly, south of Mount Olympus. Pindar in his *Olympian* 6 celebrates the *apene* victory of Syracusian Hagesias (Fig 13.1). Herakles, the founder of the Olympics used to ride mules, as did Dionysos and Silenoi, who were routinely depicted riding mules (Fig 13.2).



Fig 13.1. *Tetradrachm* minted after 476 BCE at Messene (*ΜΕΣΣΑΝΑ*). A mule-cart driven by a seated charioteer is being crowned by Nike, who places the crown on the mules. On the obverse and over a spray of olives a running hare is depicted, probably to indicate the speed of the mules!



13.2, left: Terracota plaque, early 1st c. BCE, Athens agora. Herakles is shown on a mule that seems to 'resist' as shown by his ears raised to the front, the head looking at the sky, and the front legs in stubborn refusal! **Middle:** Vase painting depicting Dionysos riding a mule. He is preceded by a Satyr and followed by a woman playing the dialulos. **Right:** Vase scene painted by Epiktetos, Athens agora. A satyr on a pacing mule (both right legs are moving forward). It is notable that this vase was made in the year 500 BCE, when the *apene* was first run at Olympia

For my own part, I think it is a shame that mule racing was discontinued at the 84th *Olympia* (444 BCE). My guess is that the local Elean organizers of the Olympics, discriminated against mules for no other reason than that, during the 56-year life of this sport, they constantly lost to 'foreign' breeders. The conventional theory is that the rich and influential colonial Hellenes in Italy and Sicily were responsible for the introduction of the *apene* mule-cart race, at the time a considerable innovation at Olympia. It is also evident from the long lists of double winners, all of whom were inhabitants of *Magna Graecia* (see Ch. 26), that native Greeks had very little chance of winning this contest. It was for this reason that the *apene* was often depicted on Sicilian coins, as well as wine cups with satyrs. In addition, several *apene* victors from the west were celebrated by *epinecean* odes composed by Pindar. For example we may cite *Olympian 4* honoring Psaumis of Kamarina and *Olympian 5* and 6, which report the victories of Hagesias the Syracusian. We do not know exactly when Hagesias won his race, because the Elean lists systematically 'forgot' to mention *apene* victors. This is verified by Pausanias who noted that '... it is questionable which Olympiad he <Hagesias> won.'

I am convinced that Hagesias must have won the *apene* race at the 78th *Olympia* of 468 BCE. This was two years before the death of Hieron, his Syracusian compatriot who won three consecutive equestrian contests at the 76th, 77th and 78th *Olympia*. My conviction is based on the fact that Pindar's *Olympian 6* goes so far as to include the name of Hagesias's driver *Filtis* (or *Fintis*), a detail often omitted from the official Elean lists.

In fact, Pindar's *Olympian 6* contains the only name of a mule-cart driver, and this 'naming' reflects the changing status of professional drivers. The payment made by victorious owners to their drivers was indication enough that their success was owed in some measure to the contribution of an 'outsider', an idea which conflicted with Greek moral standards. Pindar responded to this difficulty, first by recognizing the driver but then, by the deployment of a 'double' (Aineias) representing him as firmly dependent on the victor and, by extension, replaceable.

The mule driver serves two further functions in Pindar. First, the poet protects his own work from the taint of the market place by elevating himself above the driver. Second, Pindar uses the driver to articulate the relationship between the victor Hagesias and the city's tyrant Hieron. Just as Hagesias presents himself as the mule to Hieron's horse, so Pindar suggests that he is the mule-driver to Hieron's victory. The only element missing in Pindar is the history or etymology of the term *apene*, which remains unknown although it probably meant 'a pair of yoked oxen on a cart' in ancient Greek.

Again, it is not difficult to explain the omission of *apene* victors by the Eleans. As it seems, there existed a curse, known as the '*Oinomaos curse*' on mule breeding within the territories of Peloponnesos. This curse required an explanation, and one was attempted by Plutarch in a phrase found in his *Hellenic Questions*:

'The most horse-loving king philippotatos (philos = friend, hippos = horse) Oinomaos loved this animal [the horse] beyond every extreme, but he cursed (the act of) its mating with donkeys in Elis [to breed mules]...'

The mule curse was also known to Pausanias, who seemingly disliked the half-bred animal. Describing the *apene*, he thought the contest was neither true to ancient tradition nor pretty, as shown in the phrase which figures on the header of this Chapter. The same issue, i.e. breeding mules, was handled differently by Herodotos. He did not believe in the curse and was present at the 84th *Olympia* of 444 BCE, at which time the *apene* had just been discontinued. Herodotos read his dithyrambic texts on Greek victories against the Persian invaders, and pondered: '*Why is it that ... in Elis where the climate is not as ... cold as in Skythia (where an inability to breed mules was blamed on its bad weather), there could be no mule breeding?'*

Xenophon, who had spent part of his life at an animal farm near Olympia, offered a more interesting explanation in his *Peri Hippikes* (V.8: '*It is for adornment too that the gods have given the horse mane and forelock and tail. In proof of this, brood mares are too fastidious to be coupled with asses while their hair is long. Therefore mule breeders hog their mares' manes for this purpose*'). We are invited to infer from this passage that mares were too proud to couple with jackasses. However, cutting the mare's mane and docking her tail would have had a practical advantage in facilitating mounting by asses.

The ancient Greeks were very successful horse breeders and the practice was a favorite pastime and part of their agricultural heritage just as they prided themselves on being the first to domesticate the cow some eight millennia earlier. They were, it seems, concerned with genetic problems and 'curses' as explained by Theognis in a text of the 6th century BCE):

'We search for rams...and horses of good breeding...and we want to breed with them. Yet, a good man gets married to a bad woman if she carries wealth. And no woman refuses to wed a bad husband who is rich. Wealth has messed up breeding...'

Curse or no curse, very few mules were bred in Peloponnesos and local people like the Eleans may well have frowned upon this freak and long-eared hybrid with its quasi-horse appearance. Considering the religious conservatism of the Eleans, and the odd, often wild, behavior of mules at most *apene* races, the only surprise is that it took more than fourteen Olympiads and 56 years before the mule-cart races were finally discontinued. In our days, of course, there are no such thoughts on stopping mule racing, particularly in the States. A fact that no ancient Greek guru, not even Aristotle, could ever imagine is that 2,500 years later, in the university of Idaho, a research group of geneticists succeeded in cloning the first mule baby on May 4, 2003!

Idaho Gem was the name given to the first clone, whose famous brother *Taz* is a mule racer on the circuit in Nevada and California and has won quite a few flat races. The Idaho scientists crossed the parents of *Taz*, a jack donkey and a horse mare. They allowed the resulting fetus to grow for 45 days, which provided the DNA needed for the clone. The researchers then harvested eggs from mares, removed the nucleus of each egg, inserted the DNA from the fetal cells and planted the new eggs into the wombs of 307 mares. There were 21 pregnancies, but only three (1%) carried to full term. The two identical “brothers” of *Idaho Gem* were born in June and August, 2003 and the hope of the geneticists is that they may be faster than their “brother” *Taz*, who lost showdown races to his usual adversary, *Black Ruby*, a mule known to dominate the circuit.

The cart for the two-mule *apene* was just as slender and light as those used for the two-horse *Synoris* chariot, and it was run over the same distance, eight laps (Pindar, *Olympian 6*) or 9 km (6 miles). The only structural difference of the mule cart was that it had much larger wheels and a sitting board (Fig. 13.3). In contrast to the *synoris* and *tethrippon* charioteers, the *apene* drivers ran their race seated. As an amateur driver myself, I don’t find this surprising since the canter or gallop of a mule is rather ungainly and bumpy by comparison with the smoother action of horses. Being seated, however, did not prevent drivers from falling, as depicted on the silver coin of Anaxilas of Rhegion who was the purported winner at the 75th *Olympia* of 480 BCE. In fact, a fall from a mule cart must have been dangerous if not potentially fatal. The wooden structural elements of the high, boxed-in seat would not stay intact but would shatter to pieces.



Fig 13.3. Panathenaic prize *amphora*, c. 500 BCE. London, British Museum. The mules gallop eagerly, and the driver is cracking a goad held in the left hand, while the four reins are held in the right for security. Note the heavy construction of the 4-spoked wheels, the higher position of the sitting driver, and the wrong canter of the mules. They are seen lifting the left front legs, although the race is turning leftwards in which case the right front legs should be lifted first normally

I do hope the mule owners and riders in the United States or elsewhere continue to try to enter dressage, driving and (why not) event, endurance and jumping shows as well. It would be very interesting to watch a mule or a team of mules, or for that matter, a pair of zebras, win equestrian events against horses! However, I am afraid that history repeats itself all too frequently and that its lessons are just as often forgotten. The officials who decided to disqualify the dressage mules in the U.S championships may have, albeit un-intentionally, repeated the 2,500-year old mistake made by the *Hellanodikai*, the judges of the Hellenes. Furthermore, I am almost certain that, had the American mules been allowed to compete and had won, the judges would not have bothered to record their victory, just like their ancient predecessors, the *Elean Hellanodikai*.