

Historical investigation and emergence of the exercises and acrobatics that refer to parkour

Kaimakamis, D.*

Department of Physical Education and Sports Science, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki 54124, Thessaloniki, Greece.

Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate and record all the elements and acrobatics that man has cultivated, from the ancient times until the modern days, but also to make the comparison and the emergence of these elements and their relationship to a sport, which internationally is called parkour. The main features of the above activity is the pass over the various obstacles (natural and manmade) with speed, power and efficiency, using only hands, feet and the whole body. Activities with similar mobility features were cultivated from ancient times through the centuries, in various combinations and for various purposes: in searching for food (hunting), in military training, in sports, in entertainment (acrobatics, dances, circuses, etc.). Elements of parkour are found in the gymnastic methods of great educators-instructors of the 19th century, some of whom are considered to be the informal introducers of parkour. The real basis of parkour was put by the French naval officer Georges Hebert, in the first decades of the 20th century.

Keywords: parkour; acrobatics; military training; hurdles; speed.

1 Introduction

In the Greek bibliography, but also in the international one, there are not specialized and completed tasks that investigate the historical roots and prototype of parkour. This gap was covered in a degree by this study, since it listed activities that have similarity or a direct relationship to parkour from ancient times until nowadays.

In order this historical research to be valid and reliable it was necessary to be firstly a brief record of the main characteristics of parkour. Then, the main features of the various human activities (sports, military training, and spectacles) through the centuries were researched. The collation and the comparison between modern parkour and all these activities followed, in order their relationship to be determined.

Some people classify parkour in the so-called extreme sports, since they consider it as a mixture of martial, dancing and acrobatic art. Some consider that it is nothing more than a "variation of the battle field of soldiers", a military event of stipple chase with hurdles. Others consider that parkour is the "art of motion" or the "art of free bodily expression without limits", (Kaimakamis 2017).

A simple and concise definition is the following: "it is a sport, a competitive but sometimes and non-competitive physical activity, in which the trainee aims to move as fast as possible, from a point A to another B, passing various obstacles and using only his legs, hands and body" (Kaimakamis 2017).

The above general definition includes perhaps the most extreme acrobatic elements with the simple and easy ones adapted to beginners and children. The trainee has to pass any natural or manmade obstacle in a safe, skillful, efficient and approachable way.

*Corresponding author: e-mail: Mr.james.82@hotmail.com

As obstacles can be considered the rocks, rivers, trees, logs, ditches, walls, shear walls, terraces, railings, cars, stairs, balance beams, vaulting horses, parallel bars, horizontal bars, layers, cubes etc. In parkour there are some basic technical points that must be noticed by the trainee, but he also can use his own style and his own technique for each exercise and obstacle. This rule is not applied in the sport of gymnastics, since the technical specifications of each exercise are predefined and inflexible.

Regarding the degree of difficulty in parkour it is the same with all the other sports. It can be practiced in a simple, easy and playful form, with low and easy obstacles that are especially adapted to beginners and children, but also in a very difficult form. In the second case the experienced athletes perform, depending on the obstacle they meet, risky leaps and acrobatic exercises, with a particular dynamism, flexibility, speed and skillfulness in borderline conditions (Kaimakamis 2017).

Regardless the level of difficulty and the form of parkour, the trainee must be able, any moment, to choose alternative ways of movement and course, which he may use, both in daily life and in situations of emergencies. This means that his pass from any obstacle or gymnastic apparatus must be quick, convenient, harmless and it must have a natural flux, elastic landing and to allow continuity.

If the trainee inserts in his program exercises and movements of various sports, games and dances (capoeira, breakdancing, artistic gymnastics, etc.) and competes with others adding grace in speed, technical perfection and skill, then this form of parkour will be called free running and the trainee-athlete is called free runner (Kaimakamis 2017).

2 Method

This study is a bibliography review study, while the method used is that of the research field. Originally there was the collection of data, which was classified on the basis of their chronological and historical value. The material collected was based on written primary, but also secondary sources of ancient, newer and modern credible writers. The present study has value, since it refers to a popular sport that is cultivated by many young people and children around the world and, of course, is evolving rapidly.

3 Elements of the parkour in the acrobatics, dances, sports and military training in the ancient world

If somebody studies the acrobatics, sports, dances and the military training of the various ancient nations (Chinese, Egyptians, Hittites, Etruscans, Greeks, etc.), he will find that there are many elements that allude to this new and popular sport (Mouratidis 2008, Kaimakamis 2003).

Decker & Herb cite numerous pictures of ancient Egyptians acrobats, who, with grace and skillfulness, performed various acrobatic elements (Decker & Herb 1994). There are also testimonies, that the Etruscans performed several spectacular jumps, using an inclined board (Diem, 1960). Especially the ancient Greeks – from the Minoan and Mycenaean era until the classical and Hellenistic era-cultivated various forms of acrobatics, sports and sporting activities, which also allude to parkour (fig. 1). (Mouratidis 2008, Kaimakamis et., al. 2001).

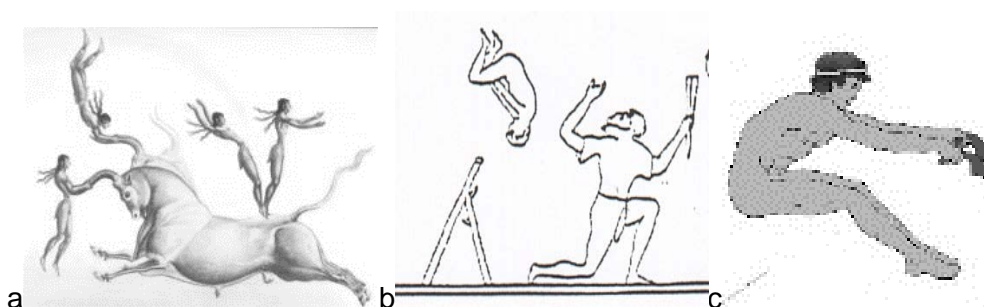


Figure 1. a. Rolling forward over the upcoming bull in the Minoan sport of Bull-leaping.
b. Acrobat's jump over an obstacle c. long jump with dumbbells.

Arrianos (95-180 a. C.) in his manuscript "Alexander's advance", described the campaign of Alexander the Great against Persia and made a reference, inter alia, that the special troops of the Grand Commander consisted of skillful climbers and impetuous acrobats, who passed with lightning speed any manmade and natural obstacle. In this way these "climbers" conquered the so-called "Sogdiana" Stone, a particularly inaccessible and fortified site of Sogdians (Arrianos, Alexander's advance).

Several ancient authors give us information about ancient acrobats and women's and men's dance acrobatic art and rope walking (Homer, Iliad, Odyssey, Plutarch, Lycurgus 16, 401-c, Xenophon, Sparta State, 2.11., Plato, Symposium 190 s, Plato, Epicharmos, 204-d-e). It is certain that the ancient nations, in order to train their soldiers, used natural and manmade obstacles. The soldiers passed them with speed and momentum in various ways (high jump, depth jump, long jump, climbing and landings). Such elements were included, among others, and in the Spartan upbringing (Xenophon Sparta State, 2.11, Mouratidis 2008).

In 390 a C. the Roman writer Vegetius (Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus), in his textbook entitled "Epitoma rei militaris" described and commented, with each detail, the tactics and the martial art. Among other things, he makes references to wooden model of horses of different size, in which the soldiers trained, mostly during the winter months. Depending on the feature that each soldier had and the height of the horse, he performed various jumps (ascents, descents), with or without support, passing underneath. All these as well as the author's description refer to the modern parkour (Vegetius 390, Kaimakamis, et., al. 2007).

These elements (exercises, apparatuses, hurdles, movements) that refer to the modern parkour are found in the military training, acrobatics, performances, training and hunting of the various ancient nations.

4 Elements of parkour in acrobatics, dances and military education during the middle ages and the Renaissance

In the middle ages the acrobatic art was cultivated in the Central Europe, by professional acrobats, who did spectacular performances in neighborhoods, fairs, and royal courts. In the same era, the riding of horses and the practicing of the knights in wooden model of horses were among the seven chivalric virtues (Gasch 1920, Kaimakamis 2003).

The knights were going up and down with speed and dexterity to the wooden horses, they were jumping over them with support or without support or they were rolling down between the legs of the horses, practicing in this way all their physical abilities, items that

were necessary for a warrior. The Byzantine philosopher and historian of the 14th century, Nicephorus Gregoras (1295-1361 a. C.), referring to stunts of professional acrobats, describes exercises in a horizontally stretched rope (hangings, swinging, spins) (Grigoras 1358). Also, the various acrobatic stunts, performed by the Byzantine acrobats with a quick flux (as a side sight) in the hippodrome, were very famous and allude to a form of parkour.

Francois Rabelais (1483-1553 a. C.), in his well-known novel "Gargantua and Pantagruel" (1535), refers to the young hero Gargantua, who, in order to be practiced, he performed various rolling forward, while he was passing under a makeshift horizontal bar, about which he writes: " between two trees, a wooden bar was fastened, from which he was hanging (Gargantua) with hands and did swinging from one side to the other, without touching the ground with his feet" (Rabelais 1535, Screech 1992).

In the painting "children's games" (1560 a. C.), Peter Bruegel (1530-1569) pictured children playing in a large yard. A lot of these games (about 80) refer to the modern parkour. Some indicative games are the following: passing a teammate with stretching of legs, chasing, leap onto a low wall, climbing on railings and wall, exercises in a low horizontal bar (Gasch 1920).

There is a relationship between parkour and acrobatics of Archagelo Tucaro (1535-1616), who taught the acrobatic art for thirty years in the courts of three kings of France. In 1599 he published a three-volume work entitled "Trois dialogues del exercise de sauter et voltiger en l' air" (three words for the art of leap), in which movements, exercises and various spectacular acrobatics that refer to the parkour, are described and illustrated (fig. 2) (Schmidt 2008). Tucaro was the first who systematized the various acrobatic exercises in categories, described them and indicated the method of their learning. Tucaro is the founder of the modern floor exercises (Götze 1994).

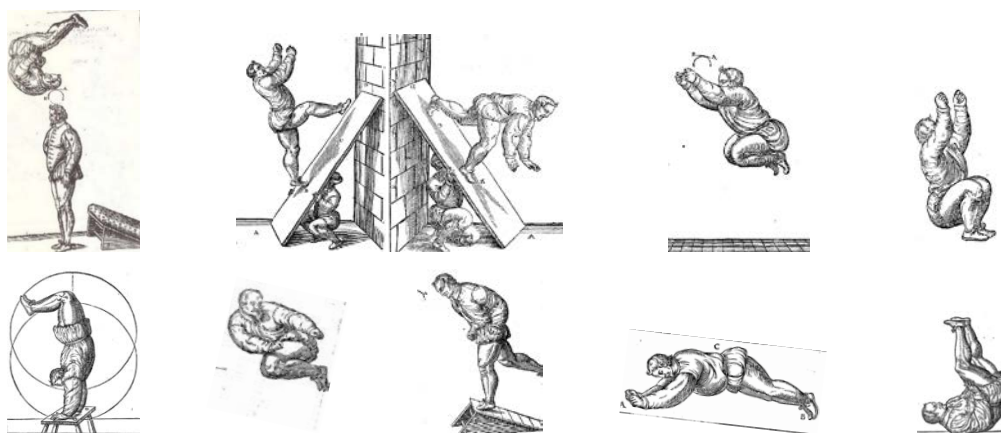


Figure 2. Indicative illustration of acrobatic exercises from Archagelo Tucaro's book, which refer to parkour.

5 Elements of parkour in acrobatics, military education and sports during modern times

From the early 17th century, the practice in the model of a horse, in the gymnastic table as well as the fencing were particularly popular sports in the various States of Western Europe (Kaimakamis 2003). Especially the rich young men, the knights and the soldiers performed quick and skillful ascents, descents, jumps and passes in various natural or

manmade obstacles. These activities also refer to parkour (Gajdos 1997, Gasch 1920) (fig. 3).

This model of horse and those exercises, originally practiced for military purposes, over the time, were evolved into the gymnastic horse, an apparatus with a board that added a special spectacle to the sport of gymnastics, but also to the modern parkour (Kaimakamis 2003).



Figure 3. practicing of the Knights in models of horses and gymnastic table, in which they cultivated various physical skills, necessary for their military and martial obligations. All these elements refer to parkour.

In the last decades of the 18th and in the early 19th the Philanthropists incorporated gymnastics into their educational systems, according to the standards of the ancient Greeks. In order to cultivate children's strength, skill and courage, they used jumps, climbing, hanging and generally the quick pass over manmade and natural obstacles. (fig. 4) (Gutsmuts 1793). Also, besides the gymnastic horse, the balance beam and obstacles, such as rivers, trees and logs for the cultivation of strength, agility and courage of the trainees.



Figure 4. trainees pass with speed and agility the gymnastic apparatuses and natural obstacles, just as the modern parkour athletes do (Gutsmuts 1793).

In the first decades of the 19th century some educators-trainers, based on the teaching and the books of the Philanthropists of the 18th century, created their own gymnastic movement. So, three predominant systems of gymnastics (German, Swedish, English) were created, which spread around the world. They contained exercises and acrobatics similar to those of parkour (Smernou 2010). Especially, in the outdoor gyms of that era, when the German Gymnastic system was established, a lot of elements that were similar to the modern parkour, were included in it. Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852), the founder of the German gymnastic system, founded his first outdoor gym in 1811, near Berlin.

There, he asked his students to pass the fixed gymnastic apparatuses (horizontal bar, parallel bars, vaulting horses, balance beams, climbing nets, climbing ropes) and the natural and manmade obstacles (tree trunks, walls, ditches), with momentum, strength and speed, without being interested in the technical performance (fig. 5) (Jahn & Eiselen 1816). It is obvious that this way is similar to the way of performance of the modern parkour athletes.

The pioneer Jahn knew very well that through sport and particularly through practicing in these apparatuses, the young men would become strong, skillful, courageous and armed patriots, whose primary purpose would be to bounce the Napoleon's French troops that occupied their homeland (Krüger 1993).

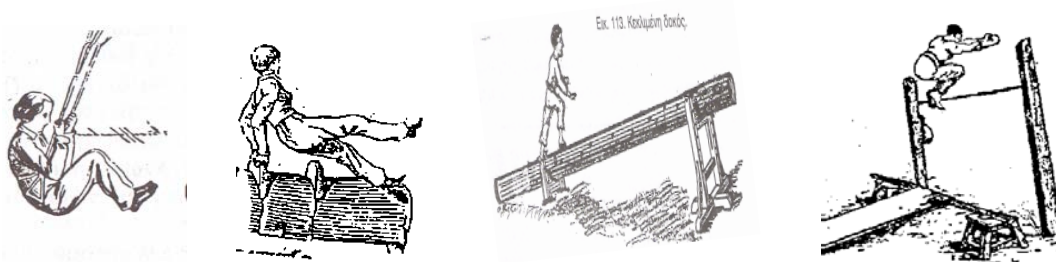


Figure 5. Indicative presentation of apparatuses and exercises that refer to parkour according to the founder of the German Gymnastic system, Ludwig Jahn.

Elements of this sport are detected and in the gymnastic methods of great educators-instructors, who had been active in various countries during the 19th century, such as Heinrich Fokion Lias, Odeano Amoros, Franz Nachtegal, Miroslav Tyrs etc. (Chrysafis 1965).

The first two dealt particularly with the military exercise, as the informal pioneers of parkour. They described a series of exercises in natural and manmade obstacles, which are similar to the exercises of modern parkour athletes. They also said that this kind of gymnastics is addressed to soldiers, who had to cultivate strength, speed, courage, intelligence and determination. They were not interested in spectacle and acrobatics, but in the effectiveness. For this reason they very often used terms such as "momentum", "intensive movement", "jump over any obstacle in a minimum and smart way", "art of the wall leap and dismount" (Chrysafis 1965).

In the decades that followed, there was a rapid evolution in athletics and in various sports. In many of them, such as in artistic gymnastics, in the acrobatic art and in the battle arena of camps, parkour was cultivated in the same way, without being called in this name, as it was a separate sport. Sometimes, in the sport of gymnastics competitive systems were applied – even in the Olympics of the first decade of the 20th century- that were similar to parkour, since the athletes were passing rapidly from an apparatus to another, in a kind of circular training (Kaimakamis 2001).

Also, in the sport of track and field in the Olympic Games in Paris (1900), in the competitive program there was a 2,500m race (steeple chase), in which every 500 meters there were 4-5 natural obstacles, such as a fence 90 cm a 2.50 m trench filled with water, a matting 75 cm high, a wall 90 cm high. Chrysafis notes the following for the above event: "This event, since neither the exercise areas of the clubs nor the stadiums have such a special arena, ceased to be included in the programs of the games, although it is more athletic and practical than the utterly conventional steeple chase with hurdles" (Chrysafis 1930).

6 Brief report on the appearance and spread of parkour

Over the time the character and the form of the various sports changed a lot, while new events and sports appeared. At the same time the athletes began to specialize in specific sports and events, since some of them took part in more sports, even in major competitions, like the Olympics and the World Championships.

The track and field events were in the program of the gymnastics competitions until the decade of 1950. These events were abolished from gymnastics and some new ones appeared, like the rhythmic gymnastics, the acrobatic gymnastics and the trampoline (Kaimakamis 2001).

In the same way a new sport called parkour sprang up and developed. Then, it was recognized and spread as a regular sport within and under the aegis of the IGF (FIG) (Kaimakamis 2017). The first theoretical and practical bases of parkour were founded in the beginning of the 20th century by the French naval officer Georges Hebert (1875-1957). He was a worthy trainer of marines, who developed his own methods and educational tactics (Kaimakamis 2017).

The direct inspirer of parkour is considered to be the French Raymond Belle, of Vietnamese origin, (born in 1939, soldier, firefighter and student of "Methode Naturelle") and his son David Belle (born in 1973), who in the decade of 1980 put the first basis of parkour in the suburb of Paris Lisses. The athlete Sebastien Foucan (born in 1974) was another worthy French pioneer of parkour. He spread this sport mainly in Britain, where he also made a career as an actress, presenter, teacher of parkour and stuntman. He followed a special way in order to perform exercises and pass the hurdles. He named this way free running (free runners) (Kaimakamis 2017).

The stream and the fashion of parkour soon arrived in Greece. The last fifteen years, more and more children and young men showed their interesting and enthusiasm for this new sport. The World Championship that takes place every year in Santorini Island, from 2011, contributed greatly to the advertising and spread of parkour. The Greek Dimitris Kyrsanidis, who has also gained and several other world titles, was twice a world champion in these games (Kaimakamis 2017).

7 Conclusions

From ancient to modern times, men cultivated various activities that had the same kinetic elements of the modern parkour. There was an almost complete identification of parkour with the military training, since this way of sporting and training was very useful to soldiers and trainees in general.

Parkour elements are found in acrobatics, sports and military training during the middle ages and the Renaissance. This is obvious in the training of the knights and noble youths, who, among other things, ascended and descended with speed and dexterity the model wooden horses that they leaped or passed in various ways. The various acrobatic stunts, performed by the Byzantine acrobats with momentum and speed at the hippodrome, included elements of parkour.

Various elements of parkour are also found in acrobatics, military training and sports, even in the art of the recent years. This is obvious especially in the gymnastics programs of Jahn's, Amoros' and Lias' students.

All of them and especially the French officer and Navy trainer Georges Hebert, who excelled in the first half of the 20th century, can be considered to be the direct inspirers of parkour. Parkour appeared with this name and evolved into an extreme sport since the decade of 1980. The teachers of Physical education, the coaches of parkour, but also the

athletes of this sport can study this work and can gain useful information, knowledge and ideas for this activity. In the school and massive sports parkour is used as a means and not as an aim in itself.

References

- Antoniadis, A., & Gidaridis D. (1993). Exercise in education, Thessaloniki (in Greek). Athenaeus, Dipnosofistes (Deipnosophists).
- Arianos, Alexanrou anavasis, 4. 18.4-19.4.
- Crysafis, J. (1930). The modern international Olympic Games, Athens.
- Crysafis, J. (1965). The gymnastics of ancient Athens.
- Decker, W., & Herb, M. (1994). *Hbo Bildatlas zum Sport im alten Ägypten*, Leiden, N. York.
- Diem, C. (1960). *Weltgeschichte des Sports und der Leibesübungen*, Stuttgart.
- Franzopoulou E. and al., (2011). «Acrobatic Gymnastics in Greece from Ancient Times to the present days», *Studies in physical Culture and Tourism*, Vol. 18, 4-337-342.
- Gajdos, A. (1997). *Artistic Gymnastics. A history of development and Olympic Competition*, London: British Amateur Gymnastic Association.
- Gasch, R. (1920). *Handbuch des gesamten Turnwesens und der Verwandten Leibesübungen*, Wien and Leipzig.
- Götze, A. (1994). *Mond Salto*, Nördlingen: Verl. Steinemann.
- Grigoros, N. (1358). A´ period (1204-1341), Roman history, Chapters 1-11(in modern Greek D. Moshos Athens 1997), pp. 320.321.
- Gutsmuts, J.Ch. F. (1793). *Gymnastik für die Jugend*, Schnefenthal.
- Herodotus, 129. English translation by A. D. Godley. Cambridge. Harvard University Press. 1920.
- Homer, Iliad p. 590-595, 605, Odyssey, d. 17-19.
- Jahn, L.F., & Eiselen E. (1816). *Die Deutsche Turnkunst*, Berlin.
- Kaimakamis, V., Anastasiou, Ath., Duka, S. (2007). An Outline of Development of the Gymnastic Horse from the Roman Times to the Age of Humanists. *Studies in Physical Culture and Tourism*, Vol. 14, No 1, 47-51
- Kaimakamis, D. (2017). *Parkour. Schoolwork-massive Form*, Thessaloniki
- Kaimakamis, V. (2001). Main features of the development of Gymnastics in the first half of the 20th century. Doctoral thesis. Department of Physical Education and Sport science auht Thessaloniki (in Greek).
- Kaimakamis, V. (2003). *Artistic gymnastics Viii*, Thessaloniki (in Greek).
- Kaimakamis, V., Duka, S., Papadopoulos, P. (2001). "The Bull and the equestrian events and disciplines of the ancients as distant ancestors of competition horses». *Sporting history and philosophy-Athletic History and philosophy*, 1, 57-69 (in Greek).
- Kaimakamis, V., P. Stefanidis, Gogou, M. (2001). "Acrobatics and dances in antiquity: A comparison with the floor exercises in the modern era," *Physical Education and Sport* 46, 13-23 (in Greek).
- Krüger, M. (1993). *Einführung in die Geschichte der Leibeserziehung und des Sports*, Band 9, Verl. Karl Hofmann: Schorndorf.
- Mouratidis, J. (2008). *History of Physical Education and Sport in Ancient World*, Thassaloniki (in Greek).
- Pausanias, Description of Greece, Pausanias, 3. 14.8.
- Plato, Symposium 190a, Eythidimos, 204-d-e. Laws, by R. G. Bury (2014). Loeb Classical Library, London: Harvard University Press 2014.
- Plutarch, Likourgos (Lycurgus) 16, 401-c.
- Rabelais, F. (1535). *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, (Translation: Drakondoidis, F, Athene, 2004).

- Schmith, S. (2008). *Kopfübungen und Luftspringen*, München: Verl. W. Fink.
- Screech, M. (1992). *Rabelais*, Paris, Gallimard.
- Smernou, E. (2010). Main features of the evolution of the three dominant gymnastic systems of Europe (German, Swedish, English), during the 19th century, Postgraduate thesis, Department of Physical Education and Sport science, Auth, Thessaloniki.
- Vegetius (390). *Epitome of Military Science*. Translated with notes and introduction by N.P. Milner. Translated Texts for Historians, Vol. 16. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993. (2nd edition 1996; second revised edition 2011.)
- Xenophon, *Lakedemonion Politia* (Sparta State), 2.11.
- Xenophon, *Symposium* (Symposium), 2-1-17.