

A Comparative study of the ancestral jacket wrestling traditions of Turkey & Western Europe to try to answer a question;

Could Aba Gures be classified as a form of Celtic wrestling?

This question is best explored by comparing Turkish jacket wrestling with a style of wrestling that is undeniably Celtic in origin, **gouren** the style from Breizh (Brittany) in Western France.

Firstly a brief description of the sports we are comparing;

Aba gures is practiced mainly in the south central provinces of Turkey, Gaziantep & Hatay, to a lesser extent in neighbouring provinces, as well as across the border in Syria & occasionally extending into Lebanon. Demonstrations of **aba gures** have been given in Ankara, Istanbul & Edirne but the true heartland for the sport remains in Southern Anatolia. The **aba** is actually a type of sleeveless coarse woollen vest that is used in the sport & **aba gures** could best be translated in English as 'vest wrestling' but like any style of jacket wrestling, forceful throws are the prime appeal of the game. The sport is governed nationally by the *Turkish Traditional Sports Federation* which helps fund tournaments in **aba gures** as well as two other styles of indigenous Turkish wrestling, **Kisa Salvar gures** from Kahramanmaraş Province & **Kusak gures** belt wrestling of the Tatar people originally from Crimea who migrated to Anatolia over a century ago.

Gouren is the indigenous wrestling style of the Breton people who have maintained a strong Celtic presence in a sea of French cultural domination. Always closely connected with the insular Celts of Cornwall & Wales, **gouren** is an important display of their cultural difference. Closely related to **Cornish wrestling** from the South Western English County, in recent times strong links have also been forged with several other traditional wrestling styles from Western Europe such as Scottish **backhold**, Icelandic **glíma**, Swiss **schwingen**, Galician **lucha Leonesa** (from Northern Spain), **lucha Canaria** (from the Spanish Canary Islands), Salzburg **rangelinn** (Austria) & **Sa Istrumpa** from Sardinia in Italy. The *International Federation of Celtic Wrestling Styles* has organised an annual European championship since 1985 in which competitors from these various sports can meet on the field of play & is slowly working towards diversifying even more by building similar bridges with other traditional wrestling groups around the world.

Although separated by a distant geography, a long history & cultural differences that some consider insurmountable, there are several clues that indicate these sports, **aba gures** & **gouren** may be more closely connected than most people would care to believe.

The following article postulates a theory & as such is open to criticisms but we welcome any discussions around the topic because at least the idea is then germinating in people's consciousness.

Besides sharing the use of a wrestling jacket, the opening stance of the two sports is the same. Competitors in both sports start the bout with a handshake.



Holds are limited to the jacket in both sports although lifting the opponent while using close body hugs is considered OK.



The two sports also share many of the same attacking moves in which the hold across the shoulders leads to forceful throws.



Tripping is likewise a powerful technique used to establish a fall as there is no grabbing of the legs. The aim of the two sports is the same, to achieve a back touch fall.



The prize of a sheep is another commonality to the Turkish & Breton sports, demonstrating the pastoral connection in both traditions.

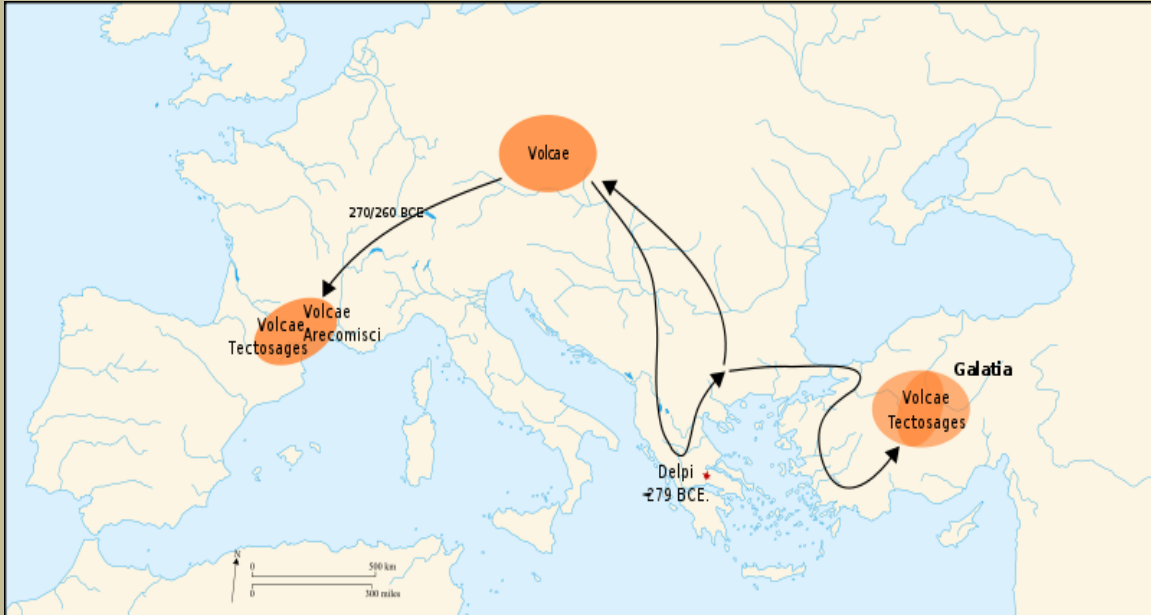


Unusual amongst combat sports in the Middle East, **aba gures** actually encourages the participation of women, like **gouren** does in Europe.



The major **aba gures** tournament is conducted around the same time as the pagan Celtic [Lughnasadh Festivals](#) in which sporting events were held in honour of the great culture hero Lugh. The [Hatay Yayladagi Festival](#) is held on August 8-9 & about 25,000 spectators watch this event. Traditional music is an important component of tournaments in both Brittany & Hatay/Gaziantep.

It is probably worthwhile at this stage exploring the historical timeline of Celtic Galatia to understand the substantial influence it has had on the region & even modern Turkish culture. The origin of the Galatians is best demonstrated by the map below which shows they come from the same ancestral source as the Gaulish people of France & the Galician people of Spain.



281BC Brennos the Chief of a united force of Celtic tribes invades Macedonia eventually sacking the Temple of Delphi; not to be confused with the same named chief who sacked Rome in 390BC. This however is also the most common name of Lugh, the Celtic god of light, head of their pantheon.

278BC 20,000 men, women & children cross into Asia Minor under the chiefs Lennorius & Lutarius at the invitation of Nikomedes I King of Bythnia to act as mercenaries in his wars of succession against a rival claimant. As a reward they are given territory in the Central Highlands of Anatolia, developing a Celtic isolate in the middle of a Hellenised region.

269BC Galatian warriors were well known in this period for their raids on neighbouring polities & mainly due to their sheer physical size & fearsome presentation, for their work as mercenaries across the region, including as far as Egypt; for the first time in their history however they faced military pachyderms in the 'Battle of the Elephants' against the Seleucid army.



232BC Galatia as an ethnic constituency is created with three tribal groups working in a triple alliance Tolistobogoi, Tektosages & Trokmoi establishing Ankyra (Ankara) as the regional capital. This was formerly a ruined Hittite fortification but the Galatian word for ‘anchor’ was used as the name of the city henceforth. Strabo records that a council of 300 met annually at a place called Drynemetos i.e. Holy Oak Grove of the Druids, to judge all crimes of murder throughout Galatia.

190 BC Chief Ortigon of Tolistobogoi attempts to unify the three tribes into a single state by oratory & rhetoric but is unsuccessful; he does however leave a prophetic ‘Arthurian’ type legend that a king will one day come to unite the land after a cataclysmic event. In recent times some have come to interpret this prediction as referring to Ataturk.

189BC after siding with Antiochus the Seleucid King in his war against Rome & its allies, the Galatians inevitably face a major defeat & are forced to retreat to their stronghold in Ankara. This is a dark period in their history symbolised by the famous Classical statue of the ‘Dying Gaul’ which is a marble replica of a bronze original done to commemorate the event.

86BC after inviting all 60 of the Galatian clan chieftains to feast & subsequently murdering them, King Mithridates forces the tribes to side with Rome during the wars against his Kingdom of Pontus, Galatia starts to again grow in prestige as the Romans become a new superpower in the region.

60BC the whole of Galatia is finally unified under the first king Deiotarix I, a contemporary of Vercingetorix; unlike what happened in Gaul it became recognised as a Client State of Rome by Julius Caesar while he was in Egypt with Cleopatra. The Celtic martial arts became highly refined in this era & it is documented in Classical sources that jacket wrestling was used as a method of warrior training.

25BC Galatia was finally annexed as a province of the Roman Empire at the death of the third Galatian king Amyntas & was subsequently extended far to the south of Anatolia into Cappadocia province but always maintained its own cultural essence.

50AD Paul of Tarsus visits Galatia as attested to in his ‘Epistle to the Galatians’ & just like the later development of the Celtic Church in Western Europe, the whole region is quickly evangelised into a Christian zone.

420AD although it is documented by St Jerome that people were still speaking the Galatian language using the same words as those of Western Europe, under Byzantine rule Galatia is thoroughly Hellenised. It is thought the Galatian language had lost common usage by the 9th century; however it still survived in linguistic pockets.

1073AD the independent & short lived state of Galatia was created with another invasion from Western Europe, this time lead by a contingent of Frankish & Norman knights crusading under the leadership of Roussel de Bailieul, who successfully fought against the Byzantine forces but he was ultimately defeated by the Seljuk Turks.



1077AD beginning of the Sultanate of Rum (Rome), many Galatian words are subsequently absorbed into the Turkish language & the Muslim Faith is entrenched.

1243AD is the era of Mongol domination & the introduction of **bokh** jacket wrestling into the region. Mongolian **bokh** has many similarities to **aba gures**, as seen in the photo above leading many to speculate that **aba gures** originated in Central Asia.

1290AD due to a power vacuum created by the continued conflict between the Seljuk Turks & the Mongols, a small democratic state is created in Galatia known as the Ahiler Republic.

1356AD Galatia is incorporated into the Ottoman Empire through the conquests of Orhan I, the pre-sultanic Bey of the Empire.

1402AD Galatia is briefly conquered by Timur & becomes part of his large Central Asian Empire but within a decade is returned to Ottoman control.

1923AD with the defeat of the Ottoman Empire after WW1, Galatia becomes the base of operation for General Mustafa Kemal who leads the resistance against the Allied Occupational Forces who are carving Anatolia up amongst themselves. With his successful military campaigns & his declaration as first president Ataturk, Galatia comes into the Republic of Turkey as the province of Ankara, the new capital of the country.

The above timeline clearly shows that although many different cultural groups have impacted on the region, the Celtic Galatians were a major influence that left behind traces of their long presence, including possibly their style of jacket wrestling. The only other nearest regions that have indigenous jacket wrestling are Armenia & Georgia to the north-east. **Chidaoba** from Georgia is very similar in appearance to **aba gures** as seen in the other photo above. The traditional Armenian style of jacket wrestling, known as **kokh**, although currently struggling for survival, was once a very popular sport in its country. Both these sports have a long antiquity just like **aba gures** & **gouren**, undoubtedly they all share a common heritage but how is open to supposition.



Hatay & Gaziantep sit roughly equal distance between Salzburg (Austria) and Khorassan (Iran) which also hold indigenous forms of jacket wrestling. The Persian sport of **bachookkeh kushti** (i.e. wrestling with chookkeh vests) is also very similar in appearance to **aba gures** as shown in the photo above, leading many to speculate a common origin but it is possible that Austrian **ranggeln**, also seen above, may actually be more closely related. Like **aba gures** tournaments, the major **ranggeln** event, **Hagmoar von Hundstein**, is held at the beginning of August whereas **bachookkeh kushti** tournaments are held in the Persian New Year (**Nauruz**) March 21. Although the language of Salzburg is no longer Celtic, the fact that wrestling is performed around the time of the **Lughnasadh Festivals** probably demonstrates the sports Celtic connection & this is after all the Halstatt heartland of where Celtic Culture began, according to confirmed archaeological information.

This shows that even if the spoken words of the region change, indigenous sporting forms can survive, strongly modified of course as they go through their own evolutionary progressions. This is also seen in Uzbekistan where the jacket style of **kurash** has been adopted as the national sport of the country but interestingly during the era of Mongolian domination in the 13th century, the region was depopulated of its original Indo-European speaking communities to be replaced by Turkic language groups. Jacket wrestling was the major sport of the Scythian, Cimmerian & Sarmatian peoples who once dominated most of Central Asia from Hungary in the west to Xinjiang & Siberia in the east. It was probably these people who first introduced jacket wrestling to the Celtic people about 3,000 years ago as well as to the diverse peoples of Central Asia. Outside of **aba gures** in Turkey, **kurash** in Uzbekistan, **kures** in Kazakhstan, **khuresh** in the Republic of Tuva & **gyulesh** among the Uighur people of Xinjiang, jacket wrestling is actually rare in the Turkic world. The latter two were obviously developed in imitation of Mongolian **bokh**, while Uzbek **kurash** is most likely a remnant of an earlier Indo-European sport as is Kazakh **kures**. These sports had a major influence on the development of Russian **sambo** jacket wrestling in the 1930s & through **shuai jiao** Chinese jacket wrestling, inevitably on **jujitsu/judo**.



Belt wrestling is much more popular in the Turkic realms & is practiced in places as far away as along the Volga River in Russian Tatarstan, where it is called **koras** & has been an important part of the Kazan Sabantuy Summer Festival since time immemorial, in Kyrgyzstan where it is also practiced on horseback & is known as **oodarysh**, in the Republic of Turkmenistan & by the related Turkmen people of Northern Iraq, Iran & Afghanistan, as well as that practiced by the widely dispersed Diaspora of Crimean Tatars which as already stated is called **Kusak gures** in Turkey. Since 2002 there has been a World Championship arranged in belt wrestling through the *World Wrestling on Belts Committee Alysh WWBCA* which is recognised by the *International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles FILA* & the 2004 championships were held in Istanbul. Even **yagli gures** or Turkish oil wrestling, which is the most well known of the traditional styles of Turkey, uses special leather trousers called *kizpet* to assist in holds, see below & no doubt began as a fusion between the Turkic & Hellenistic traditions.

The ancient Greek style of **orthopale** (i.e. upright wrestling), as performed in the stadiums during the religio-agonic ‘Olympik Games’ amongst other ancient sporting festivals, was the predominant form of wrestling in Anatolia from the time of Alexander the Great in 334BC till the Byzantine era in the 7th century when the Christian churches forbade all pagan customs. **Orthopale** was performed completely naked after the wrestlers had oiled themselves up before the competition, as per the relief below. The Turkish word for champion wrestler, *pehlivan*, which it shares with its Indo-European neighbours of Central Asia, might actually derive from the Greek word for wrestler, *palaistis* & the *palaestra* were special training venues specifically used

for teaching wrestling across the Greco-Roman world. Multiple sources probably came to influence the development of **aba gures**, from the Greek, Scythian, Caucasian, Mongolian & Persian styles but I believe primarily the Celtic jacket style was most significant in its origin.



In comparison with Galatia, Hatay Province actually has its own distinctive history. Hatay is a southern province on the Mediterranean coast, with Syria to the south & east and the Turkish provinces of Adana & Osmaniye to the north and Gaziantep to the north-east. The province is part of Çukurova (formerly Cilicia), a geographical, economical and cultural region that covers the provinces of Mersin, Adana, Osmaniye, and Hatay.

Settled since the most ancient times, as demonstrated by the recently uncovered ruins of Gobekli Tepe (the oldest temple complex in the world at 12,000 years old) in nearby Sanliurfa seen below, it was once part of the Akkadian Empire, then the Amorite Kingdom of Yamhad, then a succession of Hittites, (the Neo-Hittite “Hattena” people gave the modern province of Hatay its name), then the Assyrians and Persians. There are several references in Hittite sources of ritualised wrestling performances done in front of stone pillar effigies of the gods & no doubt wrestling is very ancient in this part of the world. Artwork from the Sumerian culture of what is now Iraq shows that a type of belt wrestling was popular in the vicinity 5,000 years ago, as seen in the small statuette below known as the Khafaji Bronze. The region was the centre of the Hellenistic Seleucid empire, home to the four Greek cities of the Syrian tetrapolis (Antioch, Seleucia Pieria, Apamea, and Laodicea). For a brief period the area was part of the Armenian Empire but from 64 BC onwards the city of Antioch became an important regional capital of the Roman Empire.

As a footnote it is worth mentioning that Daphne, a small place about 4km from Antioch, once held a sporting festival that was originally called the Daphnea, (sacred to Apollo and Artemis) , but was also later called the Olympia, after the inhabitants of Antioch purchased the title from the Eleans in 44 AD. This gave them the privilege of hosting the ancient Olympic Games. It was not, however, regularly celebrated as an Olympic festival till the time of the Roman Emperor Commodus (180-192AD). The celebration was abolished by the Byzantine Emperor Justin I in 521AD. The writings of Libanius and of Chrysostom, the Christian Fathers who lived many years at Antioch, gave various particulars respecting this festival but I’m sure most people are unaware that this was where the Ancient Olympiks were once staged.

The area was conquered by the armies of Islam in 638 and came under the control of the Ummayyad and Abbasid Arab dynasties. Then following the first Turkish conquest by the Tolunoğulları tribe in 877 Hatay was controlled by various Turkish emirates, under the umbrella

of the Seljuks and the Aleppo-based Hamdanoğulları. Then in 969 the city of Antioch played an important role in the First Crusade and was brought within the Byzantine Empire as a result. Eventually Hatay was captured from the Crusaders by the Mameluks eventually becoming part of the Ottoman Empire.



The province was annexed from, what was then, the province of Syria (part of the Ottoman Empire) by France after World War I. France then became the mandatory power in Syria and Lebanon, with self-governed Alexandretta succumbing to its military control as part of this mandate. Although geographically part of Syria, in 1938, the province declared its independence from French-ruled Syria changing its name to Hatay. On 2 September 1938 as WWII loomed ever more ominously over Europe the assembly proclaimed the Republic of Hatay, taking as an excuse that rioting had broken out between Turks and Arabs. The Republic lasted for one year under joint French and Turkish military supervision. The name "Hatay" itself was proposed by Atatürk and the government was under Turkish control. On the 29th June 1939, the parliament of the newly declared Hatay Republic voted to join Turkey. To date, the Syrian government does not recognize this decision, and considers Hatay to be part of Syria. However, this issue has nowadays become sidelined as Turkey and Syria have strengthened their ties which included the opening the borders between the two countries. The administrative capital is Antakya (Antioch), while the largest city in the province is the port city of İskenderun (Alexandretta).

Hatay is one of the most cosmopolitan provinces of Turkey, home to communities of various background and religions including Sunni Muslims, Alawi Muslims, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Maronites, Greek Orthodox and Armenian communities. The village of "Vakıflı" in the district of Samandağ is Turkey's last remaining rural Armenian community while Arabs form the majority in three districts out of the twelve in Hatay: Samandağ (Alawi), Altınözü (Qusair) and Reyhanlı (Sunni). Because of this diversity it is difficult to determine the true origin of **abagures** & most literature prescribes a Mongolian, Persian or Scythian genesis. As yet no connection has been made with Celtic Galatia in literature but from a purely logistical point of view this does make sense. With the encroachment of Byzantine & Ottoman law into Galatia it must have been more than tempting for the inhabitants to emigrate to find a land where they were free to practice their own cultural ways & with the enlightened multi-cultural patterns of Hatay it wouldn't be surprising if they made this their new world. Over time & numerous occupations by foreign forces, minority groups inevitably blend into the mainstream but do often leave tell tale traces of their former presence.



Of course this is all just speculation but **aba gures** could well be a surviving aspect of Galatian culture; this cannot be ruled out because of the numerous similarities between the ancestral sports of Hatay & Brittany, especially the fact that they are both organized during the Celtic [Lughnasadh Festival](#). Today **aba gures** is a minor regional Turkish sport that is also played in Arab lands but this potential historical connection to Celtic wrestling may give **aba gures** stronger links to Western Europe, just as Turkey is on the verge of joining the European Union. Politically it would work well for the *Turkiye Geleneksel Spor Dallari Federasyonu* (the Turkish Traditional Sports Federation) to find a connection with *le Federation Internationale des Luttes Celtiques* (the International Federation of Celtic Wrestling Styles) that hold European championships in traditional jacket wrestling. Not only could stronger cultural links be forged directly with European people but Turkey could also rediscover its own multi-ethnic origins, moving away from its singular identity as a Middle Eastern or Central Asian culture, more to one that is connected to Europe via its national capital Ankara & not just its largest city Istanbul. **Aba gures** could be Turkey's window to joining a much larger economic community.

Coreeda Association of Australia 2010