

Massage Techniques – Traditions and Innovations in Their Application in Bulgaria

Historical Overview

Tatyana Tomova, Mariana Angelcheva
National Sports Academy 'Vassil Levski', Sofia

Abstract: Massage is one of the oldest manual methods used for recovery and prevention. It helps overcome stress and fatigue, improves sleep, boosts vitality, and reduces the risk of socially significant diseases. When applied in a specific sequence, massage techniques affect both locally and reflexively the underlying organs and systems. Numerous Bulgarian and international studies confirm the positive impact of this method. In Bulgaria, massage holds a leading position in recreational and therapeutic procedures at specialized Wellness & SPA centers and massage studios, which are gaining increasing popularity.¹

Keywords: massage, wellness education

Ключови думи: масаж, обучение в уелнес



Tatyana Tomova, PhD, Chief Assistant Prof., NSA 'V. Levski', Department of Sports Medicine, Faculty of Public Health, Healthcare and Tourism, Sofia, Studentski grad, Prof. A. Ishirkov Str.

E-mail: tomova.tatyana@abv.bg

Mariana Angelcheva, MD, PhD, Assoc. Prof., Department of Healthcare, Faculty of Public Health, Healthcare and Tourism, NSA 'V. Levski', 1, Gurguljat Str., 1117, Sofia, Bulgaria.

E-mail: drangelcheva67@gmail.com

HISTORICAL DATA ON MASSAGE

The origin of the term 'massage' points to its early existence in nearly all ancient cultures. The root of the word can be found in ancient Greek: *massein* or *massev* – to rub, to feel, Latin: *massa* – to knead, to stroke, ancient Hebrew: *moshesh* – to feel, Arabic: *massh* – gentle pressing or rubbing.²

Numerous historical monuments testify to the use of massage throughout history.

The first historical document providing evidence of massage application is the **Ebers Papyrus** from Egypt, dating back to 5000 BCE. It describes massage as a method used to expel 'putrid substances' from the body. The illustrations on the papyrus show that the Egyptians were familiar with the basic types of massage techniques (Fig. 1).

¹Petrova, Raykova 2017: 309.

²Mancheva, Markova, Bankov 1962: 7.



Figure 1. Ancient Egyptian Ebers Papyrus.

Massage was also known in **Ancient China and India**, where **various types were developed and specialized schools were established depending on the goals and tasks being addressed**. Many original methodologies were created for the treatment and prevention of various diseases.

In the ancient Chinese medical treatise *Huangdi Neijing* ('The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon'), written around 3000 BCE, it is stated that massage originated in Central China, and *Anmo* is the oldest term for massage. The term combines two types of influence on the human body. *An* means pressure with retention at a specific point, *Mo* means massage movement along a line or channel. These techniques were used to prevent and treat various diseases by stimulating specific active points.³

Massage reached a particularly high level in **Assyria and Babylonia** (2000–600 BCE). Cuneiform writings mention its use as a healing method in temples. The prolonged

wars these states engaged in, created a need for a strong army. Massage was applied to heal and strengthen soldiers. This is considered the beginning of **sports massage**.⁴

In ancient Indian texts such as **Sushruta and Ayurveda** ('Book of Wisdom, Science of Life' – *ayu* meaning life, *veda* meaning knowledge), dating back to 1800 BCE, massage is described as a treatment for injuries using roots, oils, minerals, and metals.

In **Ancient Greece**, massage was used as a means of healing and hardening warriors. The earliest references come from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which describe bathing and rubbing of Greek heroes. Many preserved vases and frescoes depict massage application. In the strict regime of Spartan warriors, massage was routinely performed by the soldiers themselves on one another. (Fig. 2). These early forms are considered the origins of **self-massage**, which is still practiced today when needed.



Figure 2. Spartan Warriors.

Herodicus (488–425 BCE) was the **first doctor** in Ancient Greece to **attempt a physiological rationale for massage**. He prescribed it to both sick and healthy individuals.

Hippocrates (460–374 BCE), known as the father of medicine, expanded Herodicus's massage theory. He used massage as a means of recovery and maintaining work capacity, **laying**

³ Goranova 1995: 9; Goranova 1991: 15.

⁴ Mancheva, Markova, Bankov 1962: 8.

the foundation for rehabilitative massage. His famous words: *'The effect of massage lies in the natural restoration of the body's vital forces.'*

Massage saw significant development in Ancient Rome. Roman physician **Asclepiades** (128–56 BCE) recommended massage alongside natural elements like sun, water, and air. **He refined its technique and combined it with passive and active movements. He also introduced the use of ointments and vibrational massage.**⁵

Claudius Galen (131–201 CE), chief physician of the gladiator school, **described nine types of massage.** He thoroughly developed the application of massage techniques – stroking, rubbing, and kneading – and outlined indications for morning and evening massage. Galen **distinguished**

between training massage and recovery massage, and before gladiators entered the arena, he applied pre-start massage, a concept still used today.

During the height of **the Roman Empire, massage was widely practiced in public baths.** (Fig. 3) Numerous historical monuments in Bulgaria from the Roman era—such as balneotherapy centers near mineral springs—show that massage was highly esteemed over 2000 years ago in places like Hisarya, Momin Prohod, and Sofia. In Pliska, Madara, and Preslav, archaeologists have discovered pools and baths with air heating systems and complex plumbing and sewage networks.

During the Turkish oppression, the healing techniques of the eastern nations spread into our country.



Figure 3. Use of massage in Roman baths.

Arab people practiced massage primarily as a **therapeutic, preventive, and hygienic method.** The well-known **Turkish hammams** had a significant influence on local customs. Massage was performed in bathhouses after exfoliating the body with a coarse scrub and

soaped hands, ensuring that the muscles were fully relaxed and the skin was cleansed with open pores.⁶ **Al-Razi (865–925 CE) described 9 types of therapeutic massage used in a hospital in Baghdad, highlighting its clinical application and diversity.** (Fig. 4)



Figure 4. Turkish Hammam.

⁵ Mancheva, Markova, Bankov 1962: 10.

⁶ Kraev 2006: 7.

Avicenna (980–1037 CE), in his renowned work *The Canon of Medicine*, provided detailed guidance **on the use of massage in treating various diseases**. He was a strong advocate of hygiene, massage, and physical exercise. Avicenna distinguished the following types of massage: strengthening, relaxing, toning, preparatory (before physical exertion), restorative or soothing (after physical exertion).⁷ Avicenna once said: ‘Massage is truly beneficial and prevents suffering from various diseases.’ He also emphasized: ‘The purpose of massage is to remove waste products from tissues that cannot be expelled through physical exercise.’

Massage developed significantly in Turkey, Persia, Armenia, and other Eastern countries, primarily through the use of public bathhouses.

In Tibet, Korea, and Indonesia, massage was applied for both treatment and recovery. Techniques used are stroking, rubbing, passive movements.

In Tibet, massage was combined with the

application of oils, mud, stones, and herbs.

The Korean massage system focused on stimulating biologically active points to treat various conditions and for preventive care.

Indonesian tradition blended massage with healing colors and herbs, aiming for complete relaxation and rejuvenation.

Among the Karelian-Finnish peoples, massage was widely practiced and even celebrated in folk epics. Finnish massage is known for its distinctive features and methodology – techniques are refined, simplified, and performed with quick, efficient grips.⁸

Massage among the Slavic tribes in old Russia stood out for its authenticity. It evolved alongside bathing rituals, which included rubbing, slapping, and tapping **the body with branches of birch, oak, or maple** to stimulate circulation.⁹ This tradition is still preserved today.

This type of massage remains popular among nearly all Slavic peoples who lived in northern latitudes, where steam baths were essential for maintaining health (**Fig. 5**).



Figure 5. Russian Bath Ritual

During the Middle Ages, the Church considered care for the human body to be heretical, leading to a prohibition on massage. The Renaissance began to shift this view in the 13th century, as intellectual movements challenged religious mysticism. One of the key centers of scientific and massage revival was Padua, whose strategic location enabled cultural and scientific exchange with Eastern civilizations.¹⁰

In the 14th and 15th centuries, anatomical studies were published, reviving interest in body culture and massage. In 1573, Italian scholar Hieronymus Mercurialis published his multi-volume work ‘The Art of Gymnastics’, dedicating significant attention to classical massage as a means of preserving health and treating various ailments.

⁷ Mancheva, Markova, Bankov 1962: 11.

⁸ Mancheva, Markova, Bankov 1962: 12.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem: 11.

The development of classical therapeutic massage accelerated in the mid-19th century, led by Swedish medical gymnast **Per Henrik Ling** (1776–1839). Through clinical observation, he created a system for treating musculoskeletal disorders that combined massage with therapeutic exercise. Ling developed the core massage techniques: stroking, rubbing, kneading, vibration. In 1857, French physician **Bonnet** advanced the application of massage for trauma and joint disorders.¹¹

In the second half of the 19th century, massage became closely linked to the progress of biological sciences, anatomy, and physiology. Various reflex massage techniques were developed, based on the interrelations between organs and tissues, viewing the human body as an integrated whole. Mechanical stimulation of receptors through massage techniques produced reflexive effects on internal organs and systems. Scientific evidence supported the beneficial impact of physical exercise and massage on the human body. During this period, techniques were systematized, and indications and contraindications for massage were defined. Both sports and therapeutic massage were refined.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, massage gained high recognition among Russian physicians. Doctoral dissertations provided physiological justification for its effects and its role in treating various diseases. A key figure during this time was Russian physician I. Z. Zabludovsky, who in 1889 defended his dissertation titled 'Materials on the Effects of Massage on Healthy Individuals'. This work laid the foundation for **sports massage**, and Zabludovsky went on to establish the first state school for massage studies in Berlin.

In 1924, sports massage was officially introduced into the curriculum of students at the State Central Institute of Physical Culture in Moscow. A pivotal figure in its scientific foundation was Prof. I. M. Sarkizov-Serazini (1887–1964).¹² He developed a structured

system of sports massage backed by scientific research and applied in practice with athletes. The system included new massage techniques, with clearly defined sequence and dosage.¹³

Development and improvement of massage and massage techniques in our country.

In Bulgaria, the development of massage reflects global trends, though with some unique distinctions. Influences came from physicians educated in Austria, Germany, and France, as well as from **folk healers** with their authentic practices.¹⁴

Massage entered clinical practice in Bulgaria in the 19th century. The foundation for therapeutic massage education was laid by prof. A. Sahatchiev. Key contributors to integrating massage as an essential part of physical therapy include Sv. Boykikieva (1956), Iv. Dikanarov (1959), L. Bonev (1963), P. Slanchev (1973), D. Kostadinov, T. Kraev, L. Todorov and colleagues (1980, 1985). Massage and gymnastics are applied in infancy and early childhood as strengthening and preventive methods (**V. Zhelev – 1961**). Segmental-reflex massage was introduced into rehabilitation training programs by Iv. Dikanarov and L. Bonev (1961), and later expanded by Kostadinov, Kraev, and Todorov (1980, 1985).

Sports massage in Bulgaria was included in the curriculum of students at VUF (Higher Institute of Physical Education) in 1945. The first instructors were prof. N. Mancheva and Dr. G. Ekimov. Prof. Mancheva (1903–1979) specialized under Prof. Sarkizov-Serazini. Together with Assoc. Prof. G. Markova-Stareyshinska and **M. Bankov**, authored the first textbook on sports massage in Bulgaria. For students at NSA 'V. Levski', textbooks on sports massage have been published by assoc. Prof. G. Markova-Stareyshinska, M. Voynikov, Prof. L. Kraejdikova, Prof. Z. Goranova, Prof. V. Zhelev M. Voynikov, Prof. L. Kraydzhikova and Prof. Z. Goranova contributed to the introduction of acupressure into sports massage.

¹¹ Mancheva, Markova, Bankov 1962: 12.

¹² Ibidem: 11-12.

¹³ Mancheva, Markova, Bankov 1962: 14.

¹⁴ Kraev 2006: 6-7.

Gradually, the teaching of sports massage as an academic discipline and the organization of courses leads to improvement and enrichment with new types of massage techniques and massages.

Today, massage is applied in medical institutions—hospitals, polyclinics, sanatoriums, specialized Wellness & SPA centers, massage studios.¹⁵ It is used for a wide range of conditions where therapeutic massage is indicated.

It can be defined as a kinesitherapeutic passive method that uses certain massage

techniques (approaches) for a dosed mechanical impact on the body. It is a method of mechanical action on the body surface, caused by the hands of the masseur through special techniques or by devices, improving the functional state of the skin, muscles, nerves, fascia, and through them, the internal organs and systems of the human body.¹⁶

The application of massage in the individual faculties and individual educational degrees at the National Academy of Sciences is continuously expanding and upgrading over time (Scheme 1, 2 and 3).

Faculty "Public Health, Healthcare and Tourism"
OKS Bachelor
<i>Specialty: Kinesitherapy</i>
<i>The field and range of knowledge includes:</i>
➤ Classical massage, cosmetic massage, apparatus massage
➤ Massage for injuries and diseases of the musculoskeletal system, sports massage, sauna and massage;
➤ Segmental reflex massage: muscular, periosteal, connective tissue, segmental;
➤ Eastern massages: chinese massage, children point massage;
➤ Specialized massages: massage of the reflex zones (zone therapy) of the feet, palms, ears, abdomen;
➤ Aroma massage;
➤ Prenatal massage.

Scheme 1. Study subjects for **bachelor's programs** in the specialty of kinesitherapy.

Faculty of „Sport“
OKS Bachelor
<i>The field and range of knowledge includes:</i>
➤ Thorough theoretical and practical knowledge of sports massage and its varieties.
➤ Massage for different types of sports.
➤ Massage in sports injuries - increasing the level of competence in trauma treatment.
➤ Recovery sports treatments - apparatus massages, sauna and cupping therapy.

Scheme 2. Courses Studied for Bachelor Programs at the Faculty of 'Sport'.

¹⁵ Mancheva, Markova, Bankov 1962: 13.

¹⁶ Zhelev, Kraidjikova, Voinikov 2006: 12; Kraev 2006: 8.

SPA culture, eastern and aqua practices	➤ Eastern Practices and Presopuncture
SPA culture, hydro, lito and thalasso practices	➤ Reflexotherapy and massage
Sport for excellence	➤ Sport massage
Physical education and sport	➤ East Asian massage techniques
Sport, fitness, health	➤ Reflexotherapy and massage
Kinesitherapy	➤ Manipulative massage by Terrier ➤ Clinical application of some neuromuscular techniques

Scheme 3. Elective modules for *Master's programmes*.

Masters students gain knowledge, skills and specialized scientific training in the field of massage, in their narrow specialty. Elective courses are designed to expand and complement:

- Techniques and methods of influence and control with massage techniques and Eastern therapies in sports and SPA practices;
- Prevention of Socially Significant Diseases – characteristics, and opportunities for prevention through sport, spa and fitness activities;
- Individual diagnosis and application of effective massage methods and Eastern techniques according to functional status.

CLASSIFICATION OF MASSAGE TECHNIQUES

We have adopted the term technique for individual techniques and grouped them into five main massage ways: stroking, squeezing, rubbing, kneading and shock-vibration techniques. They have their differences in terms of their physiological effects on individual tissues and body parts and are performed in

a specific sequence depending on the purpose of the massage procedure. The sixth group includes movements which are not a specific massage technique, but are a mandatory element of joint massage as they improve and restore joint function.¹⁷

Massage techniques include basic and complementary techniques. Their choice and combination depends on the nature of the disease, the goals and objectives we have set ourselves, as well as the individual characteristics of the one being massaged. The basic ones are applied to most parts of the body, while the additional ones are included depending on the area massaged, the functional state, gender and type of complaints.

Proficiency in more techniques allows for frequent changes of performance and combining them. They are performed with one and both hands sequentially or simultaneously. This prevents strain on the same muscles and allows the hands to rest. Massage techniques are performed with different parts of the upper limb and have specific methodical guidelines.

¹⁷ Mancheva, Markova, Bankov 1962: 70; Kraev 2006: 54; Zhelev, Kraidjikova, Voinikov 2006: 67-69; Zhelev, Kraidjikova 2009: 58.

CONCLUSIONS:

1. The usage and knowledge of most massage systems enriches the techniques and improves the possibilities for more effective impact;¹⁸

2. Massage performed alone or in combination with other physical means shows a high therapeutic effect and is suitable for the treatment of many conditions;¹⁹

3. Shortens the recovery period and allows for earlier inclusion of athletes in the training and competition process;²⁰

4. Different manual techniques are an effective alternative to combat everyday and professional stress, improve metabolic processes, restore vital energy and psycho-emotional balance;²¹

5. The application of manual techniques relieves pain, fatigue, and removes tension in the body²², restores the function of the cardiovascular system and breathing, and calms the psyche;²³

6. Massage is a powerful factor in increasing our functional capabilities, our level of antioxidant protection and is very important in accelerating healing processes.²⁴

DISCUSSION

The historical overview confirms that massage and the various massage techniques have ancient origins, and that invariably over time, as all sciences have developed, they have progressed and improved continuously. Today, massage treatments are not only established

in medical establishments, but also take a significant place in SPA and WELLNESS centers and massage studios.

In order to improve qualifications and upgrade competences, we find it appropriate to broaden and deepen the training of massage specialists. Annual participation in seminars and courses in the specialty, development of original techniques and creation of own methodologies with elements of different styles are a condition for enriching the methods used for treatment and prevention, in order to improve health and quality of life.

CONCLUSION

Massage techniques are an excellent method of improving health and re-energizing. They are medical wellness tools for many modern conditions. The problems of today's society caused by dynamic and stressful lifestyles are increasingly contributing to increased morbidity and decreased quality of life. This increases the interest and attention in seeking a way out and finding alternative ways to maintain good physical and psycho-emotional health. The application of massage as a healing method alone and/or in combination with other physical methods is an effective alternative to combat stress and its consequences. It will undoubtedly continue to be studied and developed in the future, and its application will not only be for treatment, but also for prevention and maintenance of health in good physical and mental harmony.

¹⁸ Ivanova 2018: 180.

¹⁹ Nesheva, Tomova 2024; Nesheva 2023.

²⁰ Topuzov 2005: 26; Tomova 2020.

²¹ Dimitrova 2024; Dimitrova and col. 2023; Nesheva 2023.

²² Dimitrova 2024; Dimitrova and col. 2023; Nesheva 2023; Tomova 2020.

²³ Mancheva, Markova, Bankov 1962: 54; Kraev 2006: 27, 40; Zhelev, Kraidjikova, Voinikov 2006: 35, 58;

²⁴ Topuzov 2005: 23.

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Масажни техники – традиции и иновации и тяхното прилагане в България. Исторически обзор

Татяна Томова, Мариана Ангелчева

Масажът е една от най-приятните, релаксиращи и силно терапевтични процедури, практикувани от векове по света. Дори в праисторически времена хората са прилагали масажни техники в ситуации, включващи травма и нараняване, или за облекчаване на хронична болка, с емпирични знания, предавани и усъвършенствани през поколенията.

Масажът е мощен фактор за подобряване на нашите функционални възможности и играе жизненоважна роля за ускоряване на оздравителните процеси и постигане на релаксация. Успешно допълва арсенала от немедикаментозни физикални лечебни методи (като гимнастика, физиотерапия, балнеолечение, санаториално лечение, СПА и уелнес терапии), като терапевтичният му ефект се дължи на естествената регулация и активиране на скритите резерви на организма. Масажът намира широко приложение както в спортната и лечебната практика, така и за профилактични цели. Напредъкът на медицинската наука и опитът на преподавателите позволяват нейното непрекъснато развитие, усъвършенстване, популяризиране и правилно приложение.

Целта на това изследване е да проследи традициите и иновациите в масажните техники, развитието им във времето, влиянието им върху българските школи и потенциала им за запазване на здравето и дълголетието днес.

