

Origins and Essences: Early Sport and Spectacle

Sports are a human universal, appearing in every culture, past and present. But every culture has its own definitions of sport.

A. Guttmann, *Sports: The First Five Millennia*, 1

Speculations abound but the origins and prehistory of sport remain obscure because the phenomenon long predates clear and substantial evidence for itself. Anthropology shows an inclination to sport (i.e., play, competitiveness) to be aboriginal and universal in humans,¹ but sport historians disagree about whether sport grew out of or into ritual, and whether sport in essence is practical, autotelic (an end in itself), ludic (playful), or symbolic. Debate about the essence of sport continues because debate about the essence of human nature continues. The emergence of civilizations, however, brings more explicit physical evidence and written sources for institutionalized sport (Olivová 1984, 10–19; Ulf 1988, 14–73).

J. Huizinga's classic *Homo Ludens* suggests that play preceded human culture and was essential to the socialization of humans, and that games were reconciliatory surrogates for war, death, and the challenges of life (Huizinga 1950, 9–10, 89–104; cf. Guttmann 1978, 1–14). Human competitiveness does seem to be an instinctual matter of survival and propagation. Paleolithic humans probably used physical performances and contests to prepare themselves for hunting, to defend themselves or their territory, for leadership selection and the establishment of social hierarchy, as boundary display, and in mating rituals and contests (see Miller 2001, 253–6, 335–7).

Studies of early Greek sport, noting connections between contests and religion or funerals, extrapolate general origins for all sport. Perhaps human games entertained anthropomorphic gods, or funeral games expiated bloodguilt.

Anthropological theories are more inclined to relate games to fertility or vegetation cults, or to rites of passage (e.g., initiations and funerals).² Somehow instinctual acts became ritualized social institutions that provided social interaction and catharsis. In societies, sport was a form of performance, a social mechanism that assisted both social order and social change. In time, early cities and soon territorial empires used physical performances for military ends (for the training, review, and testing of soldiers)³ as political displays of power, and as communications and reinforcements of royal and imperial control.

Hunting rituals and sport

Paleolithic cave paintings suggest that man's fascination with animals is aboriginal, and apparently our long existence as hunters and carnivores imprinted impulses on our psychology.⁴ Confrontations with beasts were essential to survival, and protecting others by fighting beasts and procuring food by hunting were associated with commensality (group eating) and mating hierarchies. Hunting has remained a heavily ritualized form of masculine display even in the modern world.⁵

D. Sansone (1988) argues that all sport, ancient and modern, has a single essence or fundamental nature as the "ritual sacrifice of physical energy." Applying ethology (the study of instinctive impulses in human nature) and studies of ritual and sacrifice, he traces the origins of Greek and all sport back to ritualized patterns of behavior derived ultimately from Paleolithic hunters. He suggests that when man sacrificed domesticated animals in the Neolithic Era, the earlier ritual element of expended energy, which went into the Paleolithic hunt but was no longer necessary, was still sacrificed—in the form of sport—as an enduring ritual and an offering to the gods. By a process of ritualization, the once-productive hunting actions continued, became stylized, and took on new communicative functions as sport. The hunter/athlete who best expended or sacrificed energy won the greatest honor. Sansone feels that hunting rituals explain features of Greek sport, such as sacred wreaths (as vestigial survivals from the camouflaging headdresses and screens worn by early hunters) and nudity (as an intensification of the limited clothing the primitive hunter wore to reduce his scent), and also features of modern sport, such as animal names for teams.

Our modern enthusiasm for sport may recall that of the ancient Greeks, but in antiquity the Greeks were seen as unusual in their sporting passions and practices. If sport had (and has) a single universal nature, Greek features such as nudity and crowns should have been universal and not particular to Greek culture. And so the debate continues, because theories cannot resolve the complexities of human nature or the limitations of prehistoric evidence, because modern sport may be fundamentally different, and because sport is now so culturally diverse that agreement on a single essence or function seems unlikely.

Agonism: the unique Greek?

Claims that the Greeks had a unique competitive or “agonistic” spirit, and that only they could have raised sport to the level of athletic festivals, went unchallenged for many decades. E.N. Gardiner opened his *Athletics of the Ancient World* (1930, 1) by declaring that, “The story of ancient athletics is the story of Greek athletics. The Greeks, as far as we know, were the only truly athletic nation of antiquity.” Indeed, competitiveness was fundamental to the heroic or aristocratic code of early Greece. In Homer (*Il.* 6.208, 11.784, see Chapter 3), their fathers told Glaukos and Achilles to “always be the best” and to “excel above others.” Greeks remained intensely competitive in virtually every aspect of their public life, from war to sport and politics.

Although still dear to some Hellenists, the ethnically exclusivist idea of the unique Greek has been undermined by comparative anthropological studies. European ancient sport historians took the lead in challenging the idea that the ancient Greeks invented sport. Weiler’s analysis (1974) of the motif of contest or competition (*agon*) in Greek myth and legend notes earlier versions of such myths. Weiler and Ulf’s comparative approach shows that competitiveness was a typical aspect of early societies in general (Weiler and Ulf 1988; also see Scanlon 1983). Scholars now agree that there were sporting precursors in earlier societies, and recent works try to identify pre-Greek athletic contests (e.g., Decker 2004).

C. Ulf (2011) argues that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars of Greek sport (e.g., E. Curtius and J. Burckhardt) projected modern ideological notions of competition (taken from economic theory in the context of industrialization) onto the Greeks, fashioning them as uniquely competitive creators of a distinctively “agonistic” culture. Certainly the Greeks were competitive, but competition could possibly be a “general human drive” (102).⁶

Though no longer magically unique, the Greeks remain distinctive for the degree to which they institutionalized athletics with regular festivals, prizes, and facilities (Poliakoff 1987, 18–19, 107–12). The Greeks also developed a genre of athletic victory poems and idealized the nude athlete in their art.

Mesopotamian Combat Sports and Running

From the early third millennium BCE on, at roughly the same time as Egypt, Mesopotamian civilization had public physical performances that are recognizable as sports.⁷ Evidentiary difficulties obscure exact details about some performers, contexts, and intentions, but reliefs, seals, and artwork show that Mesopotamians were familiar with wrestling, boxing (see Figure 1.1), and a form of belt wrestling. They also had sporting or athletic activities related to festivals and kingship, and their kings understood the value of spectacular performances and flattering depictions of themselves in art and literature.

The Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* describes a struggle between Gilgamesh, king of Uruk (c. 2700), and his rival Enkidu, with apparent wrestling imagery⁸:



Figure 1.1 Mesopotamian boxing relief of c. 2000 BCE. Tell Asram. Paris, Musée du Louvre.
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[Enkidu blocks Gilgamesh from entering a bridal house]
 Enkidu barred the gate with his foot,
 They seized each other,
 They bent down like expert [wrestlers],
 They destroyed the doorpost, the wall shook.
 Gilgamesh and Enkidu were holding each other,
 ...
 Gilgamesh bent [his one knee],
 With the [other] foot on the ground.

Such a physical ordeal, combat, or demonstration of strength and skill was a claim to leadership, and in literature it could signal a hero's character development.

Various Mesopotamian texts from Ur III and Old Babylon suggest physical performances associated with festivals (or possibly weddings) at royal courts.⁹ In a legal text from Ur III of c. 2000 BCE, a defeated wrestler quarrels with and murders his opponent. An Assyrian astrological text from Assur reads: "in the Month of Gilgamesh for nine days men contest in wrestling and athletics [possibly feats of strength or acrobatics?] in their city quarters."¹⁰ A text from Assur of c. 1200, but relevant to Old Babylonian times (1792–1550 BCE), mentions trials of strength by "athletes" ("the strong ones") before a deity; and administrative texts from Ur III (c. 2135–2026 BCE)

mention rations of beer, lambs, and flour to be brought to the “house of the athletes.” These “athletes” seem to be an identifiable group, but they might also be termed “performers” or “strongmen.” The evidence shows state-supported performances associated with festivals but not necessarily athletic prize festivals *per se*.

Mesopotamian kings carefully arranged symbolic demonstrations of their prowess to affirm their legitimacy as rulers, warriors, and hunters. Shulgi, king of Ur III (c. 2094–2047 BCE), supposedly performed physical feats in the courtyard of the temple at Ur, and hymns credit him with feats of “athletics and trials of strength” including running a round trip between two religious festivals some 100 miles apart in one day.¹¹

In trials of strength and athletics I am [foremost],
 In the great courtyard, as on the battlefield,
 Who can oppose me?
 ...
 I am the one who is strongest
 and most skilled in athletics and trials of strength.
 That my name be established unto distant days, ...
 ...
 I, the runner, rose in my strength, all set for the course, from Nippur to
 Ur,
 I resolved to traverse it as if it were [but a distance] of one “double
 hour.”
 Like a lion that wearies not of its virility I arose,
 Put on a girdle (?) about my loins,
 Swung my arms like a dove feverishly fleeing a snake,
 Spread wide the knees like an Anzu bird with eyes lifted toward the
 mountain.

Note that the trials of strength and athletics are analogized with warfare and associated with the courtyard of the temple, that the king wears a loincloth, and that no rival runners are mentioned. By his long distance running, the king marked his territory and claimed his throne and realm. Similar physical feats and festivals served similar ends in Egypt.

Egypt: Hunting and Sporting Pharaohs

Enthusiasm for physical recreation was not a Greek preserve. Early Egypt lacked athletic festivals along Greek lines, but Egyptians, especially nobles and soldiers, had a variety of sports and games: combat sports, running, hunting, strenuous performances by female dancers or acrobats, and ball and board games. W. Decker (1992) details evidence showing that ancient Egyptians watched or participated in their own forms of sports and spectacles, including ritual runs by the pharaoh in the Sed festival, hunting expeditions, and archery and chariot demonstrations in the New Kingdom (c. 1566–1087 BCE).¹²

Evidence and imagery

From hieroglyphics to wall paintings to sports equipment (e.g., balls and throwing sticks), evidence for Egyptian sport comes mostly from tombs of kings and nobles or from temple monuments, so it concentrates on the elite and reflects official doctrine. In Egyptian royal dogma, the pharaoh was the guarantor of life and bounty for Egypt; he was a god who could not fail in war or in his rule. The pharaoh's unique position as a living god evolved with Egypt's shift from ethnocentric security to imperialism. Pharaohs of the Old Kingdom (c. 2770–2200) were presented as strong and serene in their divinity, but New Kingdom pharaohs were expected to demonstrate physicality and skills through spectacular feats. Artistic depictions of their activities often were more symbolic or metaphorical than factually accurate. The Egyptians could not contemplate pharaonic infirmity of will or loss of power. In sport, then, he could have no rivals, and he always succeeded or won. Sporting notions of fair and open competition did not apply. As with Shulgi, royal sporting exploits became part of official and religious doctrine. The hyperbolic and absolutist claims of pharaonic sources were fashioned by dogma, symbolism, and mythologizing.

Sed festivals

The Sed or jubilee festival, in which the pharaoh made a circuit on foot around turn-posts or markers, is attested in art and architecture from the third millennium on. Decker identifies markers, c. 55 m apart, in the pyramid complex of Djoser (c. 2600 BCE) as “the world's oldest sports facility,” although “... the running track was an element of the royal funerary complex and not the stage for the actual run that took place during the Festival of Sed.” As he explains, the run was “the act and ritual demonstration of a unique person, the king.”¹³ Involving no other competitors and no great exertion, this was a performance, not an endurance race. The run took place 30 years into a king's reign, and aged pharaohs performed it. The completion of the circuit achieved its ritual purpose: an original demonstration of the king's physical qualifications for rule became a symbolic circuit of territory and a ritual rejuvenation.

Beni Hasan and displays

Over 200 painted scenes of wrestling (and female acrobatics and other activities) appear in the tombs (see Figure 1.2) of nomarchs (a local officials) at the site of Beni Hasan from the Middle Kingdom (c. 2000 BCE), and other scenes of wrestling and stick fighting are known from tombs in the New Kingdom. Paintings of combatants clearly attest skills in a variety of techniques and holds. Wearing loincloths, the participants probably were soldiers performing part of their military training. Elsewhere, in New Kingdom carvings from Medinet Habu, Egyptian wrestlers in the presence of the pharaoh always defeat foreigners, suggesting that the fights



Figure 1.2 Egyptian wrestling scenes, from the tomb of Nomarch Hotep, Beni Hasan, Egypt, c. 2000 BCE. akg-images/Erich Lessing.

were depicted to uphold the message of Egyptian superiority. Similarly, scenes of strike-and-parry stick fighting before the pharaoh suggest attention to military preparedness rather than athletic competitions.¹⁴

Sporting pharaohs of the New Kingdom

For a millennium and a half, early Egypt shows continuity in its sport, from Sed runs to depictions of wrestlers in tombs to a love of hunting and fishing, but the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1786–1560) brought changes. After the Hyksos invaded and introduced war chariots and composite bows, New Kingdom pharaohs (c. 1570–1085 BCE; Dynasties 17–20) became militaristic and imperialistic. Pharaohs of the eighteenth dynasty met the need to appear robust as warrior-hunters for military credibility (Davies 1935; Decker 1992, 34–46). The trend peaked with Amenophis II but declined in the nineteenth to twentieth dynasties.

Several New Kingdom pharaohs were sportsmen in the sense that they trained to acquire physical fitness and military skills, and they gave ceremonial demonstrations of chariot driving, horsemanship, and archery. The Stele of Tuthmosis III (1482–1450) (Decker 1992, 36–7 with trans.) from Erment proclaims:

He shoots at a copper plate because every (wooden target) is pierced like papyrus. His Majesty provided an example of this at the Temple of Amon with a target of hammered copper, three fingers (thick). His arrow was in the target which it struck.

Thereby he (the king) allowed a penetration three hand's breadths beyond so that his progeny might wish for the strength of his arms in bravery and force. I say to you (?), in truth and without falsehood, what he did in view of the entire army without boastfulness.

Note that the archery took place at a temple with the army as spectators.

The Sphinx Stele of Amenophis II (1427–1400) (Decker 1992, 37–9 with trans.) claims that the king, after drawing 300 bows, was a perfect shot even from a moving chariot. He shot four arrows as he drove by, and all four passed through copper ingot targets:

He strode upon the northern archery ground and found prepared for him four targets of Asian copper, a hand's breadth thick. Twenty ells (c. 10 meters) was the distance from one post to the next. His Majesty appeared in his chariot like the god Month [god of war] in his strength. He seized his bow and grasped four arrows at once. He drove off and shot like Month in his battle dress, and his arrows penetrated the targets. Then he attacked the next post. This was a deed never done before ... one arrow was shot at an ingot of copper, and it transfixed the plate and fell to the ground on the other side. [An impossible feat] except for the king, radiantly mighty, whom Amon [god of Thebes] has made strong, King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Amenophis II, heroic as Month.

Another piece of imperial propaganda legitimizing the king and reassuring his subjects, this purported feat of archery from a chariot, set in a special archery ground, presents the king as godly, divinely favored, and infallible. The Egyptian conception of history, however, dispensed with strict historicity, and the performance may have symbolized the domination of Asian peoples (Decker 1992, 44).

Most New Kingdom pharaohs, with the exception of Akhenaton, were represented in art as militarily aggressive and personally vigorous, and performances of combat sports by soldiers were held at court. Even the boy pharaoh Tutankhamon was buried with images of hunting lions and hippos and driving chariots (El Habashi 1992). Heavily stylized and symbolic, Egyptian imperial art and texts communicated messages of pharaonic power and blessing rather than attempting to record actual events accurately. Pharaonic feats probably involved impressive skills acquired by training, but in these carefully orchestrated spectacles the king alone was the unfailing star. At most, he competed against the feats of earlier pharaohs, thereby leading to increasingly exaggerated claims.

Egyptian athletics?

The case for Egyptian athletics depends upon limited or late evidence. A fragmentary inscription from near Luxor says that, after shooting an arrow that protruded 7/9ths of its shaft through a copper ingot target, Amenophis II challenged others and offered (unspecified) prizes for matching his performance: "Whoever

transfixes this target to the extent His Majesty's arrow did, to him belongs these things." Admitting that this is a unique text inconsistent with Egyptian ideology, Decker (1992, 41–2) suggests that the king could risk his prestige "because there was, in reality, no risk at all." Even if the king made such a challenge, no subject would dare accept it.

Decker (1992, 62–6, with trans.) hails the "Running Stele of Taharqa" of c. 685 BCE from the Nubian twenty-fifth dynasty as "irrefutable evidence of an Egyptian running contest."

His Majesty commanded that a stele be erected entitled "Running Practice for the Army of the Son of the Sun Taharqa, may he live forever." His Majesty commanded that his army, raised on his behalf, daily run (in) its five (sections).

His Majesty said: "... There is none among my army who is not toughened for battle, no weakling who acts as a commander of mine. The king goes in person to Bia to inspect the good order of his army. They come like the coming of the wind, like falcons who beat the air with their wings. ... The king himself is like Month, a powerful one, unequaled by any in his army. ..."

The king himself was in his chariot to inspire the running of his army. He ran with them at the back of the desert of Memphis in the hour "She Has Given Satisfaction." They reached the Fayum in the hour "Sunrise." They returned to the palace in the hour "She Defends Her Master." He distinguished the first among them to arrive and arranged for him eat and drink with his bodyguard. He distinguished those others who were just behind him and rewarded them with all manner of things. For his Majesty loved the work of battle, for which they were selected.

Here, the king orders soldiers to run from Memphis to the Fayum and back (c. 100 km in nine hours). He accompanies them in a chariot but joins them in running for part of the distance, and he offers awards: a ceremonial meal with his bodyguard for the victor and unspecified prizes for other runners. The running clearly is part of the soldiers' military practice and display, and the pharaoh ran only part of the way as a symbolic gesture. He did not join the race as a competitor. Moreover, this exceptional document, about a Nubian pharaoh running and giving prizes, comes from the twilight of pharaonic Egypt, not, like Homer in Greece, at the dawn of that civilization's literature.

Egypt had popular sport activities, military physical training, and ritual royal performances, but Greece unquestionably had institutionalized athletic festivals with prizes and specialized facilities. The Sed run was Egypt's oldest and most recurrent "race", the "sporting pharaohs" of the eighteenth dynasty were a new development in reaction to the Hyksos' invasion, and most depictions of sports concern the leisure activities, training, or ceremonial performances of officials or soldiers. Decker admits that Egypt had no specialized facilities for contests. Despite abundant evidence for the use of chariots in hunting and war, he finds no evidence of chariot racing, and he concedes that the chariots themselves were not specialized for racing (1992, 46–55).

Egyptian civilization lasted for thousands of years, and Egypt's climate, wealth, and funerary customs left a great deal of evidence, yet even Decker finds only a few extraordinary or enigmatic instances that might be athletic. He reveals the cultural adaptation of sports in the distinctively Egyptian context, but he admits that the prominence of athletics in Greece was exceptional.

Egyptian hunting

Hunting animals for food had a long prehistory in the Middle East and Egypt. Some 6000 years ago, numerous "desert kites," low but extensive wall formations made with stones in the deserts of Jordan, Israel, and Egypt, were traps for wild gazelles and other herd animals. The kites funneled beasts into enclosures, off cliffs, or into pits for slaughter (Holzer et al. 2010). Well-organized early hunter-gatherers clearly used topography and enclosures to their advantage.

Decker suggests that hunting in Egypt began as a way to provide food, but in time the leading hunter became a protector of early farming communities by dueling against beasts, and then, with civilization, hunting became a sport for the elite, a demonstration of superiority, and soon also a paramilitary preparation. Accordingly, swamp hunts (spearing fish and hunting fowl with throwing sticks) became a noble pastime after the Old Kingdom. Big-game hunting was the pharaoh's prerogative, and lions and bulls were reserved for the king into the New Kingdom (Decker 1992, 147–67; Houlihan 1996, 41–73). By hunting wild animals the king showed his ability to uphold the order and stability (*maat*) of Egypt civilization and to hold back the chaos of the animal world. Hippopotamus hunts were especially symbolic of the king's ability to prevent the destruction of fields. In royal art, hunts were analogous to battles, again demonstrating the king's power to maintain order in Egypt and the cosmos. Bull and lion hunts are intermingled with scenes of war on the temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu, with inscriptions declaring that the king, as a great bull, punishes the people of Asia (Decker 1992, 153–7, figs. 117, 121–2).¹⁵

Pharaohs hunted game in the wild, but wild animals also were gathered for hunts or trapped and moved to special hunting parks, perhaps recalling the desert kites mentioned above. Artificially bounded by fences and ditches, the remains of a royal hunting preserve (600 × 300 m) of the era of Amenophis III have been found in Soleb in Nubia (Decker 1992, 153). In the New Kingdom, the introduction of the chariot led to its use in chasing animals in the wild, but enclosures might still be used.

Hieroglyphic texts on the undersides of numerous large commemorative scarabs proclaim the hunting exploits of Amenophis III. Over 120 of these detail the number of lions he killed with arrows during his first ten years as king. Five others mention a wild bull hunt in the second year of his reign, when he was a young teenager. Hearing about wild bulls in the desert of the Fayum territory, the king set out to hunt them in his chariot with the whole army behind him. After having the bulls enclosed by a fence and a ditch, he then hunted for a few days and

killed a total of 96 wild bulls. Note that the king was informed of the location of the bulls and that the army kept watch and enclosed the bulls with a ditch before the king began shooting them from his chariot.¹⁶ Accounts of prodigious kills, and claims that pharaohs drove their chariots themselves and hunted alone or nearly alone, probably are exaggerated.¹⁷ The king might be shown dispatching a magnificent beast but in practice numerous hunting attendants (e.g., beaters and guards) were nearby.

Royal Hunts as a Near Eastern Tradition

As hunting, sport, and warfare became analogous in early communities, in the Near East as in Egypt, good hunters became providers and protectors—warriors who pacified, expanded, or at least defended their territory. With the emergence of populous city-states, and especially with empires, the metaphor of the hunter-king was institutionalized in Mesopotamian art, legend, and ritual.

From the earliest times, lions, as fierce threatening predators, and bulls, with their great power and fertility, symbolized leadership. To confront, kill, or tame such beasts, to be a beast-master or bull-tamer, was the mark of a great leader. In the Sumerian epic, Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu killed great beasts (e.g., the giant Humbaba, the Bull of Heaven, and lions). Mesopotamian kings and emperors appropriated such imagery to broadcast their virtues and strengths. Similarly, later Minoan, Hittite, and Mycenaean art utilized the symbolism of lions and bulls.

Since leaders were portrayed as divinely favored and superhuman, their hunting prowess and success in the Bronze Age Near East and Egypt had to be great, grand, and guaranteed. A failed royal hunt, a lack of game (and trophies), or problems with the killing would suggest personal weakness or an inability to control nature, so states arranged precautions and procedures to make hunting success more convenient and secure. Leaders set up and maintained well-stocked and well-staffed hunting parks—shooting galleries for ancient canned hunts. The carefully orchestrated spectacle of the royal hunt became an imperial institution.¹⁸

Later, in the same tradition, Assyrian royal hunts were staged for success and spectatorship. Inscriptions and palace reliefs show kings performing in brutal self-glorifying hunts. Ninth-century reliefs from the palace of Ashurnasipal II show the king hunting bulls and lions from a chariot. Ashurbanipal boasted c. 645 that he personally killed lions on foot with a lance or mace. He claimed to have killed beasts “nobly on the plain,” but he also had animals (including lions) brought to him in cages and then released for him to kill in front of spectators (see Figure 1.3). Reliefs from Ashurbanipal’s North Palace show him killing lions on foot and horseback, and shooting gazelles with a bow and arrow. One scene shows Ashurbanipal killing lions in an enclosure; he is encircled with soldiers, and assembled spectators from the royal court watch on nearby hills. Such scenes



Figure 1.3 Assyrian lion hunt scene from palace of Ashurbanipal at Ninevah, c. 645 BCE.
© The Trustees of the British Museum.

show calm strong kings killing magnificent beasts, especially lions, but note the assistants and the use of dogs, beaters, nets, and cages. Ending with libations over the victims laid out in rows, the hunt was staged around the New Year festival, and the 18 lions killed by the king represented the 18 accesses (gates, roads) to the city that he led and protected.¹⁹ Expanding upon early leadership displays, the reliefs and texts of hunts communicated imperial power to both natives and embassies. Like their boasts of brutality and heaps of bodies in wars, Assyrian kings' descriptions of their hunting exploits present hunting as a royal and a religious duty.

Persian kings later adopted the Assyrian hunting imagery of empire and royal protection, using stocked animal parks or "paradises." Xenophon (*An.* 1.2.7) notes that Cyrus the Younger had a palace and a large hunting park (*paradeisos megas*) stocked with animals in Phrygia. Later, Alexander the Great and Hellenistic kings were great hunters along similar lines, and the staged dispatching of collected wild animals in Roman arenas drew upon old Near Eastern traditions.

States and Sports, Empires and Spectacles

Neither monocausal in origin nor linear in diffusion, the genesis of sports and spectacles was a cumulative process of cultural adaptation. Performances became more structured with states and more spectacular with empires. Physical performances (e.g., hunting, dancing, running, processions, and combats) were elements

of rites of passage, mating displays, festivals, and rituals of community—fields of play upon which status was defined and social orders were (re)constituted. Sports of various types allowed communities to incorporate physicality and aggression therapeutically. Also, as warfare became a feature of civilization, physical education, mock combats, and paramilitary displays of soldiers developed.

When expansive empires arose, power was centralized in capitals and in emperors who performed rituals of power. Superhuman emperors could not compete openly and equally; there could be no real suspense about the ultimate outcome of their performances. Their feats were ritualized to assure success (e.g., Shulgi's running, sporting pharaohs, and royal hunts). With so much at stake, in time, the stylized personal physical performances became largely theatrical illusions, and the monarch became the producer and honoree of processions and performances. He assembled performers and resources on such a scale and with such control that his power was beyond question. It no longer needed to be demonstrated personally and physically. Societies need sport, but empires need spectacle.

Through orchestrated performances, displays, and royal hunts, great kings and emperors symbolically controlled territories, peoples, and natural forces. Messages of their power were preserved in texts and monuments and transmitted by word of mouth, with awe and elaboration, over great distances. The expansiveness of empires created a need to amplify, publicize, orchestrate, monumentalize, and memorialize sport as spectacle, especially in empires with diverse peoples and tongues. Like standing armies, record keeping, the publication of law codes, and the erection of monuments in stone, early civilizations needed spectacles as rituals of power and social control, as political messages reaching well beyond the leader's local circumstances. The stories and images of strong men, hunters, warriors, and "athletes" were accepted as spectacular knowledge and sport history, and such traditions continued into the Late Bronze Age.

Notes

- 1 Defining competition or rivalry as "striving to be superior to others in some respect" (i.e., either to gain something or to show superiority), van Wees (2011, 1) argues that competitiveness "... is a widespread human characteristic and has been the driving force behind many of the most dramatic developments in history from 10,000 bc onwards."
- 2 Meuli (1968, 15–67) sees the origin of Greek funeral games in the ritualistic identification of a man guilty of homicide; cf. Poliakoff (1987, 149–57). On initiations and funerals, see van Genneep (1950, 1–13, 164–5).
- 3 Spivey (2004, 1–29) argues (ix–xx) that "the imitation or enactment of violence" was an original purpose of Greek athletics. For cross-cultural studies, see Cornell and Allen (2002), or Radner (2011, 45–50), on competition among Assyrian warriors for "head trophies" of enemy leaders and for booty, eternal fame, and royal favor.
- 4 Trout (2011) suggests our continuing fascination with wild animals and beast tales stems from man's earliest fears of being chased and eaten by predators.
- 5 See Anderson (1985); Hughes (2007); Kalof (2007) for overviews.

- 6 Other essays in Fisher and van Wees (2011) show that competition for superiority was widespread in ancient societies and not limited to Greece, Rome, or Western Civilization.
- 7 Sjöberg (1985, 7–9) collects seals, sculptures, reliefs, and references to contests in the courtyard of the temple. See Eder (1994) on first millennium Mesopotamian cylinder seals depicting combats of wrestlers and boxers and other contests with daggers and swords. Also see Poliakoff (1987, 10, 18, 30–3) (on belt wrestling), 170, n. 10. Olivová's illustrated survey (1984, 21–39), includes a votive tablet of c. 2800 from Khafaje with two pairs of wrestlers and possibly a pair of boxers.
- 8 Tablet II, trans. Sjöberg (1985); cf. Rollinger (2006). Also see Poliakoff (1987, 134–40), who notes other wrestling motifs in ancient literature, e.g., Jacob in *Genesis* 32: 25–9.
- 9 Sjöberg (1985, 8–9). Rollinger (1994, 7–64) suggests late third millennium Sumer had wrestling, boxing, and footraces in festivals and possibly in funeral games.
- 10 On Assyrian footraces and wrestling matches, see Rollinger (1994, 46–53); Radner (2011, 37–8).
- 11 Kramer (1981, 284–8), *Hymn of Shulgi*, trans. Kramer, 286; Vermaak (1993); Lamont (1995).
- 12 Also see Olivová (1984, 40–61); Decker (2004, 2006); Poliakoff (1987), by events; Decker and Thuillier (2004, 9–61). Tyldesley (2007) gives a brief overview.
- 13 Decker (1992, 24–34), quotes 29, 32; Romano (1993, 10–12).
- 14 On Beni Hasan and Egyptian wrestling, see Poliakoff (1987, 25–7, 96), n. 60 on 179–80; on wrestling before the king 96, 108, fig. 10 on 27; on stick fighting 64–7.
- 15 Galon (1994) discusses scenes in Egyptian tombs of fights staged between bulls. The victor supposedly had the greatest procreative power and was used for mating. Similarly, the pharaoh was hailed symbolically as the “victorious bull.” Bull-leaping scenes also exist at Beni Hasan (tomb 29, south wall, left side).
- 16 Decker (1992, 150–2); Houlihan (1996, 71–2); Berman (1999), no. 226. Tuthmosis III reportedly killed 120 elephants for their tusks in one hunt; Decker (1992, 157–8).
- 17 For example, the Sphinx Stele of Tuthmosis IV claims the pharaoh hunted in the desert, shooting from his chariot, with only “a single companion”; Decker (1992, 51, 149, 154).
- 18 Allsen (2006), on royal hunts in the Middle East, India, Central Asia, and China from antiquity to the 1800s’ provides a comparative perspective and striking similarities: for example, hunts symbolized territorial control, political power, and royal power over nature.
- 19 On royal hunts, see Anderson (1985, 6–10, 57–82), relief figs. 5, 20, 22a and b, 23–24. On lion hunts in palace reliefs, see Bersani and Dutoit (1985, esp. 24–39).

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