

The Role of Sports in Social Communication in Ancient Egypt

Dr. Mahmoud Hamed Elhosary

**Lecturer of Antiquities and Ancient Egyptian
Language, Faculty of Arts, Department of Egyptian
Antiquities. New Valley University, Egypt.**

drelhosary@yahoo.com , Drelhosary@artnv.au.edu.eg

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Abstract:

Ancient Egypt stands as one of the most influential civilizations in human history, shaping its trajectory across the ages. Remarkably, many of the sports we enjoy today were also played in ancient Egyptian times. The Egyptians were not only familiar with these sports but also actively developed them, integrating them seamlessly into the social and cultural fabric of their society. Numerous pictorial depictions adorning the walls of ancient Egyptian tombs provide compelling evidence of the widespread popularity of sports, including gymnastics, weightlifting, wrestling, lion hunting, swimming, rowing, fishing, archery, boxing, track and field, ball games, and many more. These sports encompassed both individual and team-based activities, catering to a diverse range of participants, including children and women. Intriguingly, some sports were deeply intertwined with religious practices, performed

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during specific festivals. The ancient Egyptians held the belief that engaging in these sports fostered a connection with their deities, securing blessings and divine protection. Yet, the significance of sports extended beyond the realm of religion. Sports also served as a source of entertainment for the ancient Egyptians, with competitions and group games providing amusement and recreation. Consequently, sports played a pivotal role in social communication in ancient Egypt. During this era, sports were an integral part of daily life, profoundly influencing social interactions, fostering community cooperation, encouraging healthy competition, strengthening social bonds, and forging lasting relationships among individuals. Sports and competitions were deeply embedded in the social and cultural landscape of the time, drawing crowds, cultivating sportsmanship, and instilling national pride. Moreover, the collaborative nature of certain sports demanded teamwork and coordination among players, further reinforcing the spirit of camaraderie and collective endeavor within society.

Keywords: Sports, Ancient Egypt, Sports and Social Communication, Athletics, Sports in Ancient Egyptian Society.

دور الرياضة في التواصل المجتمعي في مصر القديمة

د.محمود حامد الحصري

مدرس الآثار واللغة المصرية القديمة بكلية الآداب، قسم الآثار، جامعة الوادي الجديد.

الملخص:

تعتبر مصر القديمة واحدة من أهم الحضارات التي أثرت في التطور البشري على مر العصور، فنجد أن العديد من الألعاب الرياضية التي تمارس اليوم كانت تُلعب أيضاً خلال العصور المصرية القديمة، حيث عرفها المصريون القدماء وطوروا فيها، وكانت تشكل جزءاً لا يتجزأ من النشاطات الاجتماعية والثقافية للمجتمع المصري القديم. وتُظهر العديد من الرسوم التوضيحية المصورة على جدران المقابر أن الألعاب الرياضية مثل الجمباز ورفع الأثقال والمصارعة وصيد الأسود، والسباحة والتجديف وصيد الأسماك والرماية والملاكمة وألعاب القوى وألعاب الكرة والعديد من الألعاب الأخرى، كانت شائعة لدى المصريين القدماء. وكانت الألعاب فردية وجماعية، وهناك ألعاب للأطفال والنساء. وكانت بعض الألعاب مرتبطة بالشعائر الدينية وكانت تمارس في أعياد معينة، حيث يعتقد المصريون القدماء أنها تعزز التواصل مع الآلهة وتضمن الحصول على البركة والحماية الإلهية. ومع ذلك لم يكن الاهتمام بالرياضة مقتصرًا على الجوانب الدينية فقط.

The Role of Sports in Social Communication in Ancient Egypt

فالمصريون القدماء استخدموا الرياضة أيضاً كوسيلة للاستمتاع، وكانوا يشاركون في المسابقات الرياضية والألعاب الجماعية للتسلية والترويح عن النفس. ولهذا فكان للرياضة دورٌ مهم في التواصل المجتمعي في مصر القديمة، ففي هذا العصر كانت الرياضة جزءاً أساسياً من الحياة اليومية للمصريين القدماء، ولها تأثير كبير على النشاط الاجتماعي والتعاون المجتمعي وتحفيز التعاون والتنافس الصحي وتعزيز الروح الاجتماعية والروابط الاجتماعية بين الأفراد. وكانت الألعاب الرياضية والمسابقات مرتبطة بالعديد من الأنشطة الاجتماعية والثقافية في ذلك الوقت، فتجذب الجماهير وتعزز الروح الرياضية والفخر الوطني، وممارسة بعض الرياضات تحتاج إلى تعاون وتنسيق بين اللاعبين، وقد ساهم هذا في تعزيز روح الفريق والتعاون المشترك بين أفراد المجتمع.

الكلمات الدالة : الألعاب الرياضية، مصر القديمة، الرياضة والتواصل المجتمعي، ألعاب القوى، الرياضة والمجتمع المصري القديم.

Introduction:

Sports played a prominent role in social communication in ancient Egypt. They were an integral part of the lives of the ancient Egyptians, forming an inseparable component of their social and cultural activities. Sports in ancient Egypt served to unify the community, promote cooperation, and foster healthy competition among individuals. They also played a crucial role in promoting peace and spreading non-violence within society.

The ancient Egyptians practiced sports for both entertainment and leisure, as well as professionally through organized competitions. They engaged in a wide variety of recreational activities during their free time. Inscriptions found in tombs provide us with knowledge of many forms of entertainment and leisure specific to the ancient Egyptians. These inscriptions shed light on various activities, such as participation in festive occasions or religious processions, as well as organizing and attending parties and feasts. The games played by the ancient Egyptians were central to their pursuit of entertainment, both for themselves and for their guests. Their repertoire included mental games, games of chance, games designed for children, sports, and fishing. These games transcended social barriers and were enjoyed by both rulers and common people. Numerous game tools used by the ancient Egyptians have been discovered, including balls, boards, dolls, hunting wheels, fishing hooks, and nets. The ancient Egyptians also engaged in a wide range of physical activities during their free time, such as wrestling, fencing, climbing, weightlifting, archery, ball games, tug-of-war, and horse racing. Evidence of these activities can be found in many tombs, including those of Beni Hasan in Minya, Saqqara in Giza, Luxor, and Aswan.

Additionally, various museums house artifacts depicting these games, such as lion hunting scenes in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, swimming practice in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, horseback riding from the 25th Dynasty in the Louvre Museum in Paris, bird hunting from the tomb of Hapy (12th Dynasty) in the Berlin Museum, and wrestling scenes from the 18th Dynasty in the Manchester Museum.

(1) The Pioneering Role of Ancient Egyptians in Sports:

Sports played a pivotal role in the social fabric of ancient Egypt, transcending mere entertainment and becoming deeply intertwined with religious practices and beliefs ¹. They served as a powerful mechanism for promoting physical well-being, honing motor skills, developing strength and resilience, and fostering sportsmanship, discipline, unwavering dedication, selfless sacrifice, harmonious cooperation, and fair competition. Ancient Egyptians engaged in a diverse range of sports, demonstrating remarkable ingenuity and setting a precedent for future civilizations.

Physical activity was an integral part of life in ancient Egypt, and sports played a significant role in various cultural, social, and religious aspects. Tomb murals depict scenes from daily life, extraordinary events like battles and desert hunts, and captivating sports and dance performances, showcasing the dynamism of ancient Egyptian society ².

¹ Zein, M., “Scenes of Some Sports Activities and their Double Significance in New Kingdom Private Theban Tombs”, *MJTHR* 14(2), (2022), p. 94.

² Bard, K.A., “*Encyclopedia of the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt*”, Routledge, London and New York, (1999), p. 195.

These popular sports, deeply rooted in Egyptian heritage and reflecting the unique character of the civilization, were meticulously recorded by the ancients on the walls of their tombs over 4,000 years ago. Ancient Egyptians stand among the earliest people to engage in a wide variety of sports. Their modern descendants, honoring the legacy of their ancestors, faithfully preserved these ancient games, practicing them with minimal or no rules, preserving their authenticity. Thus, they served as a bridge between the intricate carvings adorning the walls of tombs and temples and the modern world, where these sports have been adopted, developed, and codified, returning to us in forms that closely resemble their original essence³.

(1.1) Inherited Sports from Ancient Egypt:

Ancient Egyptian sports culture stands as a cornerstone in the history of sports, profoundly influencing subsequent civilizations, including the Greeks and Romans⁴. It played a pivotal role in shaping the games and athletic exercises adopted by later generations. Countless examples illustrate this legacy, including:

- *Soccer-Hemat/Seker-Hemat.*
- *Board Games, Senet.*
- *Wrestling: Depicted in 339 scenes in the Beni Hasan tombs.*
- *Hatu-Hatu: Evolved into handball.*
- *Swordsmanship: Transformed into fencing.*
- *Gymnastics-like Activity.*
- *Hoksha: Played with palm fronds, which evolved into field hockey⁵.*
- *Various Stick and other games.*

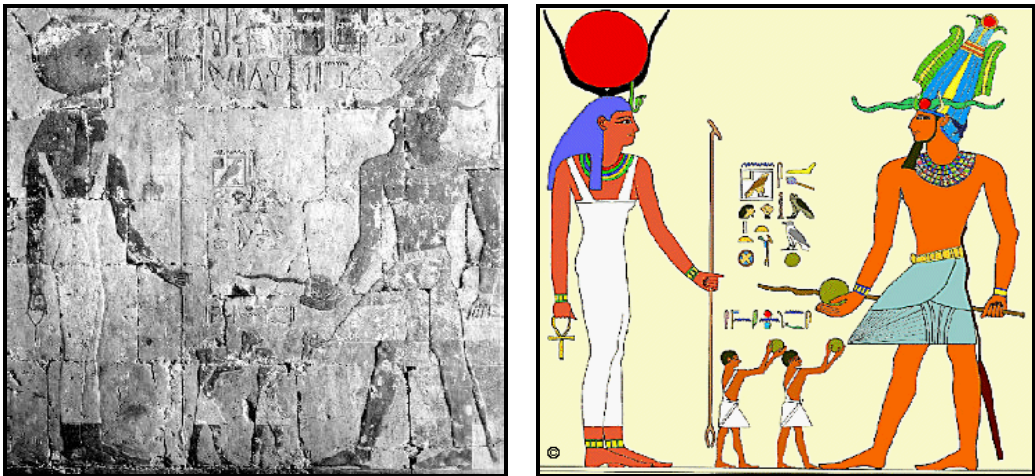
³ ‘Uṭmān, Aīman., “*Maūsū‘at Turāt Mīsr*”, Part 2, Dawn Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, (2018), pp. 111-114.

⁴ Touny, A & Wenig, S., “*Der Sport im alten Ägypten*”, Leipzig, Edition Leipzig, (1969), p. 13.

⁵ ‘Uṭmān, Aīman., “*Maūsū‘at Turāt Mīsr*”, pp. 111-114.

(1.1.1) Soccer-Hemat/Seker-Hemat: An Ancient Egyptian Baseball Game:

Ancient Egyptian kings engaged in a sport known as "Soccer-Hemat" (Fig.1), which bears resemblance to modern baseball. This highlights a significant historical link between ancient and contemporary baseball, as Soccer-Hemat shared certain physical and thematic similarities with modern American baseball⁶. In this game, Egyptian kings would strike the ball with a bat while priests acted as fielders⁷. Interestingly, while kings demonstrated their batting prowess, priests took on the defensive role. This dynamic interplay between the kings and the religious priests fostered a harmonious and inclusive environment within the game's context, thus underscoring the social and cultural significance that Soccer-Hemat held in ancient Egyptian society.



(Fig.1) A scene depicting King Thutmose III hitting the ball in front of the goddess Hathor. Piccione, P.A., (2003), p. 36.

<https://piccionep.people.cofc.edu/sekerhemat2.html>

⁶ Nāšūnāl Ġīūhrāfīk., “1000 Ḥaqīquh ‘an Mīsr Alqadīmuh”, Dar Nahdet Misr, Cairo, (2020), p. 67.

⁷ Piccione, P.A., “Pharaoh at the Bat”, *College of Charleston Magazine* 7/1, (2003), p. 36; id., “*Skr ḥm3.t: A Ritual Bat-and-Ball Game in Ancient Egypt* by Peter A. Piccione”, *Paper presented to the American Research Center in Egypt Annual Conference*, Berkeley, California, (April 2010), pp. 1-14.

(1.1.2) Board Games:

Board games served as a popular pastime throughout the various historical periods of ancient Egypt. The people of the Nile Valley enjoyed a wide range of amusements and entertainment, engaging in diverse board games both in royal palaces and in more modest dwellings. Funerary inscriptions in the tombs of kings and nobles depict individuals engrossed in such games ⁸.

Various types of board games emerged, as evidenced by their portrayal in numerous individual tombs across ancient Egypt (Fig.2) ⁹. Among the most prominent board games was Senet ¹⁰, a two-player game played on a gridded board of three rows containing 30 squares ¹¹. This game bears resemblance to modern chess and is played by two individuals. It was prevalent among kings, queens, and princes, as well as all levels of society, for over 3,000 years BC, which relied heavily on strategic thinking ¹².

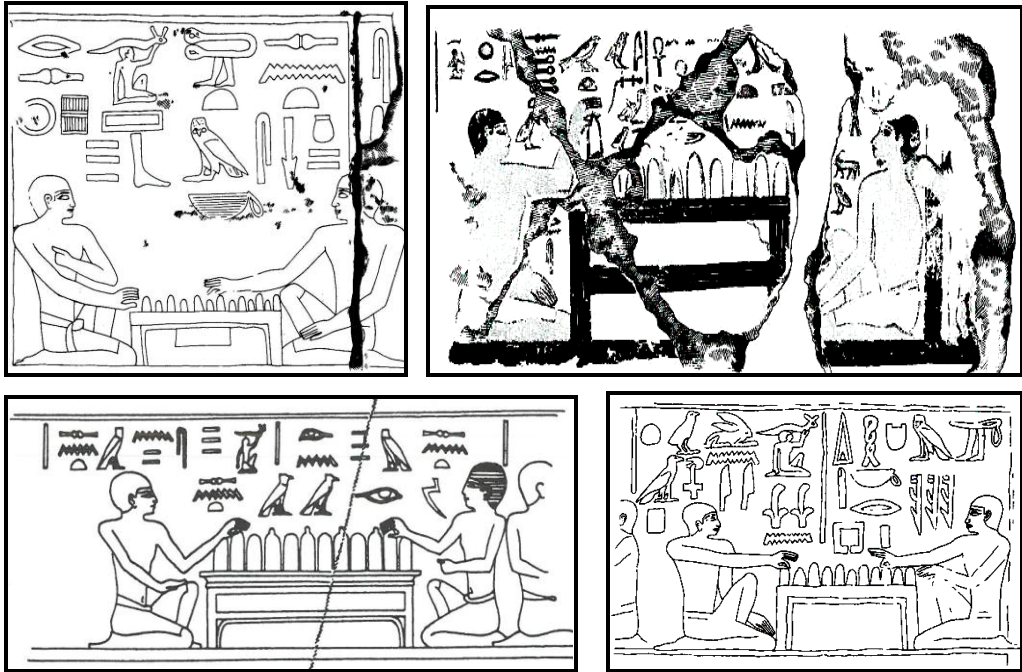
⁸ Bunson, M.R., “*Encyclopedia Of Ancient Egypt*”, 3 ed., New York, Facts on File, (2012), p. 80.

⁹ Decker, W & Herb, M., “*Bildatlas zum Sport im alten Ägypten: Corpus der bildlichen Quellen zu Leibesübungen, Spiel, Jagd, Tanz und verwandten Themen*”, Teil 1: Text, Leiden, Köln, Brill, (1994), p. 643.

¹⁰ Piccione, P.A., “In Search of the Meaning of Senet”, *Archaeology* 33/4, (July/August 1980), pp. 55-58; id., “The Egyptian Game of Senet and the Migration of the Soul”, in: *Board Games in Perspective: Proceedings of the Colloquium on Board Games of the Ancient World*, ed. I. Finkel. London: British Museum Publications, (2007), pp. 54-63.

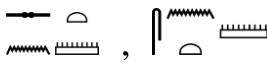
¹¹ Medhananda., “*The Ancient Egyptian Senet Game: The Game of Archetypes*”, Identity Research Institute, (2006), pp. 5-7.

¹² Piccione, P.A., “*The historical development of the game of senet and its significance for Egyptian religion*”, vol.1, Chicago (IL), Chicago, (1990), pp. 1-11; id., “The Egyptian Game of Senet”, p. 54.



(Fig.2) Multiple views of backgammon.

Decker, W & Herb, M., (1994), Teil 2: Tafel. CCCLX.

The ancient Egyptian word for Senet  *snt* translates to "board game" ¹³. The shape of the Senet board varied across different eras, but the most common form consisted of 30 squares arranged in three rows of ten squares each. This rectangular board was placed on a low table or a rectangular box that included a compartment for storing game pieces.

Despite being the most extensively studied and well-understood board game from ancient Egypt, Senet still holds certain mysteries. As mentioned earlier, it is played on a board of 30 squares arranged in three rows of ten squares each, typically made of wood, pottery, ivory, or a combination of these materials.

¹³ Needler, W., "A Thirty-Square Draught-Board in the Royal Ontario Museum", *JEA* 39, (1953), p. 63; Faulkner, R.O., "A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian", Oxford, (2017), p. 283.

A scene from Abu Roash indicates the existence of Senet during the 1th Dynasty¹⁴. The game is depicted in its entirety on the walls of the tomb of Hesy-Re from the 3th Dynasty, among other games portrayed in his tomb at Saqqara¹⁵. Interestingly, no Senet boards have been found dating from the Fourth to Sixth Dynasties, although tomb reliefs attest to their existence. The game gained popularity during the Middle and New Kingdoms and became increasingly diverse, as evidenced by the discovery of numerous game boards in the tombs of nobles and kings, as well as their depiction on walls, highlighting its popularity among all social classes in ancient Egyptian society¹⁶.

Senet held religious significance, representing the struggle to reach the afterlife. It served as a means for the deceased to enter the Fields of Aaru (paradise) if they won the game. The game incorporated depictions of deities, common religious texts found in tombs, and the Book of the Dead. During the Ramesside era, a scene depicted the tomb owner seated playing against a large serpent obstructing their journey to the afterlife. Given its religious and worldly importance, Senet became part of the funerary furnishings provided for the deceased in their tombs¹⁷.

¹⁴ Montet, p., “*Tombeaux de la première et de la quatrième Dynasties à Abou-Roach*”, Kemi 8, (1946), pp. 184-185.

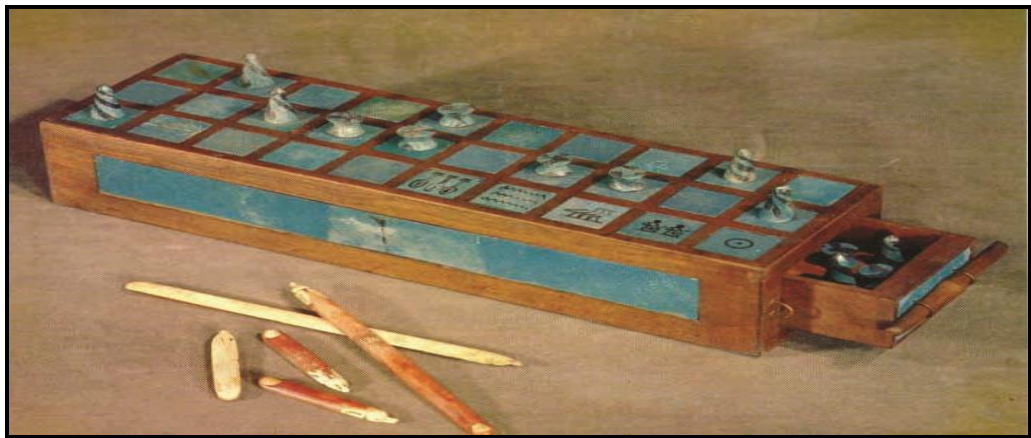
¹⁵ Quibell, J.E., “*Excavations at Saqqara (1911–1912)*”, The Tomb of Hesy, (1913), pp. 18–21.

¹⁶ Crist, W., “Passing from the Middle to the New Kingdom: A Senet Board in the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum”, *JEA* 105 (1), (2019), pp. 107-108.

¹⁷ Kendall, T., “*Passing Through the Netherworld: The Meaning and Play of Senet, an Ancient Egyptian Funerary Game*”, Kirk Game Company, (1978), pp. 1-5.

Numerous depictions of the game exist, such as In the tomb of Queen Nefertari, wife of King Rameses II (Fig.3), and the Senet board of the scribe Meri-Maat (Fig.4). One of the most famous and exquisite examples of this game was found in the tomb of Tutankhamun, who had three game boards in his tomb, the largest of which was made of gilded ebony inlaid with ivory¹⁸.

(Fig.3) View from the burial chamber of Queen Nefertari, wife of King Rameses II, playing a game of Senet. Hāuās, Zāhī., (2007), p. 19.



(Fig.4) Wood and porcelain Senet tablet belonging to the writer Meryma'at from the era of King Thutmose II, this game was found in Abydos and dates back to about 1500 BC. Piccione, P.A., (1980), p. 55.

¹⁸ Randolph, J., “*Living and Working in Ancient Egypt*”, Enslow Publishing, (2017), p. 13.

(1.1.3) Stick Fencing:

▪ A Legacy of Rural Sports:

Numerous sports persist in the Egyptian countryside, having been passed down from ancient Egypt¹⁹. Depictions exist showcasing a single-stick sport that has been erroneously referred to as "stick fighting" or "single stick" and sometimes "stick fencing." The term "fencing" is uncommon in studies of this type of ancient Egyptian sport. It is preferable to use the term "single-stick fencing" (Fig.5) here, as it does not refer to swords but rather to training in combat with sticks, clubs, and even plant stalks²⁰. Numerous scenes illustrate this game and how it was inherited by the Egyptians and became popular in rural Egypt (Fig.6)²¹.



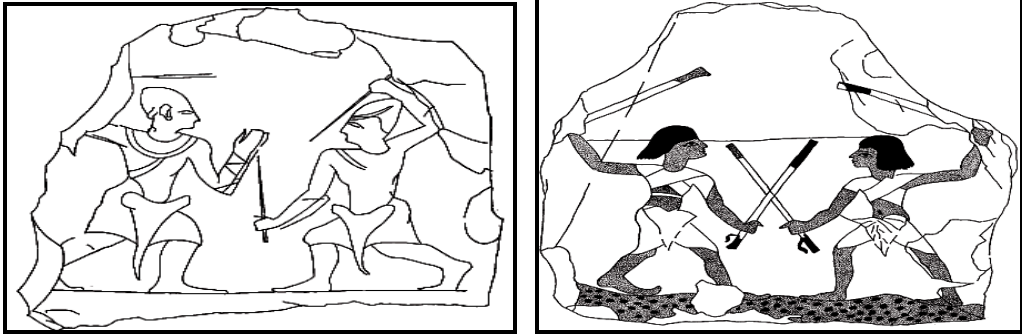
(Fig.5) A pictorial view representing a stick duel.

Zein, M., (2022), p. 97 (Fig. 2).

¹⁹ Haṛāb, Muḥammad ‘Ādil., “Al’al’āb Alrīfūh Alša’būh”, Anglo-Egyptian Library, (1961), p. 162.

²⁰ Piccione, P.A., “Sportive Fencing as a Ritual for Destroying the Enemies of Horus”, *Gold of Praise: Studies on Ancient Egypt in Honor of Edward F. Wente*, SAOC 58, (1999), pp. 335-336.


²¹ Touny, A & Wenig, S., “Der Sport im alten Ägypten”, pp. 26-27.



(Fig.6) Various scenes of stick fencing and its inheritance in the Egyptian countryside. Touny, A & Wenig, S., (1969), pp. 26-27, (Taf. 15).



▪ **Insights from Ancient Tombs:**

The tomb of the priest "Amun-mes"  *Imn-ms* at Dra' Abu'l-Naga TT19 from the 19th Dynasty ²² offers significant scenes that reveal aspects of social and religious life, most notably a scene depicting sports, particularly stick playing, which is still practiced today in rural and Upper Egypt, as well as wrestling in front of the shrine of the deified king "Amenhotep" I ²³.

²² PM., vol. I, 2nd Edition, pp. 32-33; Menéndez, G & Vivas Sainz, I., "La tumba de Amenmose e Iuy en Dra Abu el-Naga (TT 19). Nuevo proyecto y una propuesta de estudio artístico", Dossier. Egiptología iberoamericana (primera parte), *Rihao* 24, (2023), pp. 114-127.

²³ Ḥassan, Silīm., "Maūsū'at Mīsr Alqadīmuḥ, 'aṣr Ra'misīs Alṭānī Ūa-Qīām Al'imbrāṭūrīuḥ Alṭānīuḥ", vol. 6, Hindawi Foundation, Cairo, (2021), p. 170.

Due to the popularity of this sport in the New Kingdom, "Wilson" discussed it in more detail, particularly because it is a popular traditional sport that still exists throughout Egypt. Stick playing is seen at celebrations, while wrestling, although known among the sports of all nations and peoples, had its own character and its effects have remained in Egypt to this day among the Egyptian people, especially in rural areas ²⁴.

(2) Popular and Distinctive Sports in Ancient Egypt:

While the Greeks pride themselves on the fact that sports originated from the majestic Mount Olympus, with which the famous Olympic Games are associated ²⁵, it is important to note that the scenes depicted on the walls of Egyptian monuments serve as undeniable evidence of the prominent role that the Egyptians played in this field, surpassing many other civilizations around the world. The ancient Egyptian people were among the first to engage in sports. The ancient Egyptians have a long history of practicing sports and games. The history of these games in ancient Egypt dates back thousands of years before ancient Greece ²⁶.

²⁴ Wilson, J.A., "Ceremonial Games of the New Kingdom", *JEA* 17 (3/4), (Nov., 1931), pp. 212-213.

²⁵ Swaddling, J., "*The ancient Olympic games*", University of Texas Press, (1999), pp. 7-12; Toohey, K & Veal, A.J., "*The Olympic Games: A Social Science Perspective*", 2nd, CABI, (2007), pp. 9-11.

²⁶ Decker, W., "*Sports and games of ancient Egypt*", New Haven (CU) - London, Yale University Press, (1992), p. 4.

The scenes recorded on the walls of Egyptian monuments are clear evidence of this ancient sporting history. It is known that many sports were held in ancient Egypt, as they were interested in physical activity and sports and organized many competitions and games such as running, jumping, ball games, wrestling, archery, fencing, rowing, swimming, and other games²⁷. This is a testament to the popularity and spread of these games in ancient Egyptian society. If we want to talk about the types of games in ancient Egypt, then we are talking about three main types, namely:

- ***Children's Games:*** The ancient Egyptians aimed to train their children in sports from a young age. This can be seen in the variety of games played by children, including goose footsteps, rotation fun, throwing knives, military and thieves, face hiding, and the snake game²⁸.
- ***Games for Fun and Celebration:*** During national occasions and holidays, Egyptians enjoyed a variety of games for entertainment. Most of these games were practiced among young people, such as tug of war, football, handball, tennis, weightlifting, running and running, girls' ball, barriers, and hunting.
- ***Games for Strength and Skill:*** These games were practiced by military personnel and hunters and included archery (with both bow and spear), wrestling, horseback riding, swimming, boat races, and bird hunting²⁹.

²⁷ Fadel, D., "Social Entertainment in Greco- Roman Egypt (Games and Sports)", *JAAUTH* 19 (3), (2020), pp. 1-34.






²⁸ Maṣṣūr, Aḥmad., "Al'al'āb Alša'bīuh fī Mīsr Alqadīmuh", *Al-Muwarth Magazine* 22, UAE, (June 2021), pp. 160-175.

²⁹ Ḥaūās, Zāhī., "Al'ūsruh Aīām Alfarā'inuh", Dar Nahdet Misr for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, (2007), pp. 50-51.

Participation in sports was not limited to men, though they excelled in physically demanding sports like wrestling, boxing, and weightlifting. Women also engaged in fitness activities, jumping, and ball games. The ancient Egyptians were committed to strengthening the bodies and minds of their children, and sports were a crucial means to achieve this goal. Their realistic approach to sports led to numerous benefits in their practical lives. Through fishing, they obtained sustenance from both the sea and the Nile River. Wrestling provided skills for self-defense, while equestrian sports and archery offered training in martial arts, potentially aiding in homeland protection.

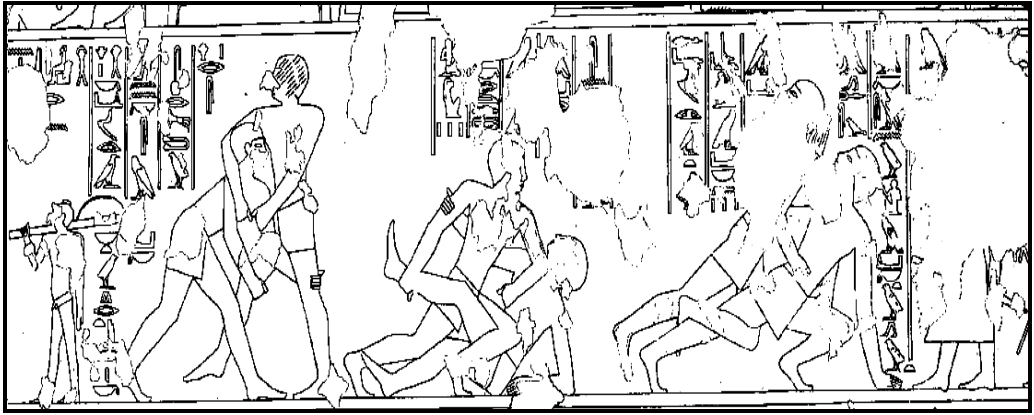
(2.1) Prominent Sports of Ancient Egyptians:

(2.1.1) Wrestling:

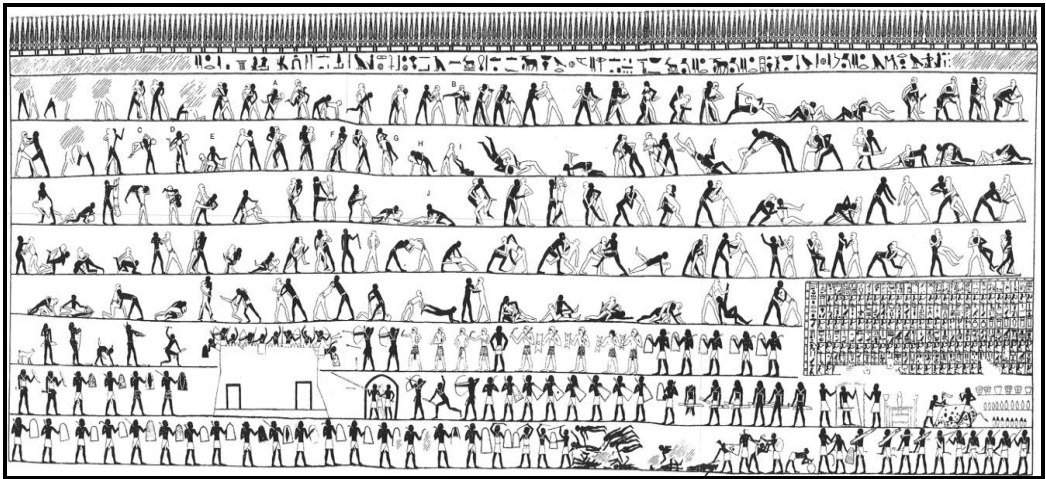
Wrestling, a sport with roots spanning millennia, has been practiced across diverse cultures and civilizations worldwide. It stands as a combat sport that demands both physical prowess and tactical aptitude. In ancient Egypt, wrestling held a prominent position among recreational activities ³⁰. The earliest depiction of this sport can be found in the tomb of Ptahhotep  *pth-ḥtp*, a noble from the 5th Dynasty, located in Saqqara. This is followed by scenes from the Middle Kingdom adorning the tombs of Beni Hasan in Minya, featuring Khnumhotep II  *hnmw-ḥtp*, Amenemhat  *Imn-m-ḥ3t*, Khati  *ḥty*, and Baqet III  *B3kt* (Fig.7 A, B, C) ³¹.

³⁰ Šāliḥ, ‘Abd Al-āzīz., “*Alšarq Al’adnā Alqadim: Mīsr Alqadīmuḥ*”, Anglo-Egyptian Library, (2006), pp. 252-253.

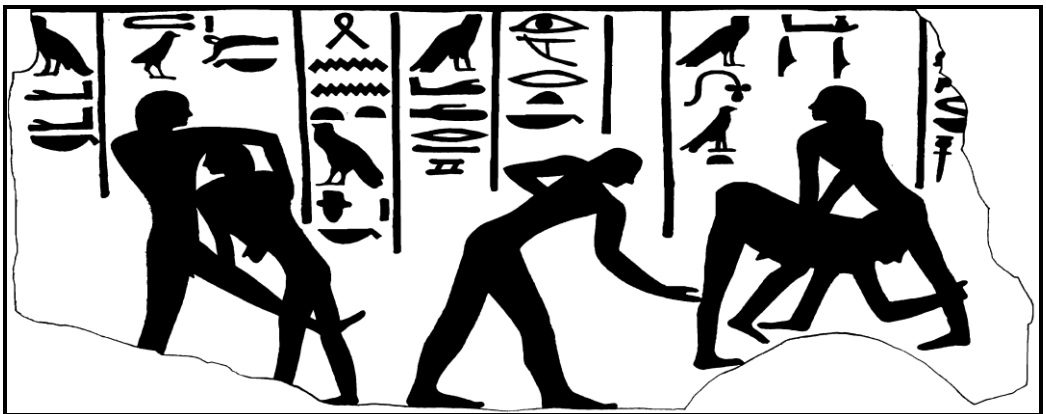
³¹ Randolph, J., “*Living and Working in Ancient Egypt*”, pp. 71-75; Motte, A., “A (Re)investigation of Middle Kingdom Speech Captions in Wrestling Scenes”, *JEA* 103 (1), (2017), pp. 53-70.



(Fig.7a) Wrestling Views from Senbi tomb.



(Fig.7b) Wrestling Scenes from the Khety tomb in Bani Hassan.



(Fig.7c) Views of wrestling from the tomb of Neheri I in Deir al-Barsha.

Motte, A., (2017), Fig. 1, 2, Plate 2.

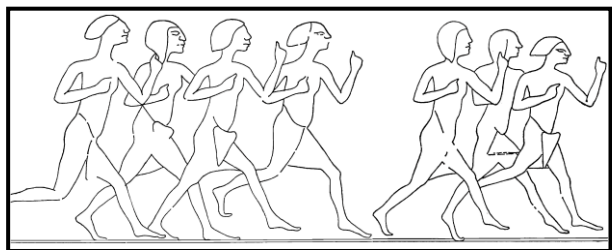
Wrestling serves as a fundamental self-defense technique. Over time, it evolved into a refined art form. The sport's history traces back to ancient confrontations and rivalries. While the exact origin of wrestling remains unclear, ancient Egypt embraced this sport with great enthusiasm, nurturing its development and eventually introducing it to Greece. Its appeal extended beyond the borders of Egypt, captivating the Assyrians and Chinese. The Japanese, too, embraced wrestling, establishing their first championship in 25 BC, known as Sumo. Notably, Native Americans also engaged in this sport prior to the discovery of America. Modern wrestling traces its roots back to the Greek people, who inherited it from ancient Egypt³².

(2.1.2) Running/Marathon:

Running competitions, or marathons as they are commonly known, held immense significance in ancient Egyptian society. Egyptians actively participated in these races to showcase their running prowess. Countless depictions of individuals engaged in running adorn ancient artifacts (Fig. 8), highlighting the sport's prominence during this era³³. A notable example of running scenes can be found in the Tomb of Ptahhotep From Saqqara, 5th Dynasty.


(Fig.8) View of soldiers running.


Touny, A & Wenig, S.,
(1969), p. 33.



³² Nāṣīf, Ġamīl., “*Maūsū‘at Al'al‘āb Alrīāḏīuh Almufaṣaluh Ta’rīfuhā, Qūā'iduhā, Naša'tuhā Ū-A'mākin Intišāruhā*”, Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyyah, Lebanon, (1992), pp. 394-395.

³³ Touny, A & Wenig, S., “*Der Sport im alten Ägypten*”, pp. 33-34.

Running was not limited to the common populace; it extended to the realm of royalty as well. For kings, running served as a crucial test of fitness and capability to rule. As part of the Sed festival  *hb-sd*, also known as the "Thirty-Year Jubilee", kings were required to run a specified distance, either alone or racing an animal, to demonstrate their physical prowess. This festival, held every thirty years, likely aimed to revitalize the king's physical and divine powers ³⁴.

The Sed Festival, held immense significance in ancient Egyptian society. Its origins can be traced back to the earliest dynasties, with evidence suggesting that kings like Den, from the 1th Dynasty, participated in this ritual ³⁵. Deeply rooted in the concept of rejuvenating the king's strength and legitimacy to rule, the Sed Festival aimed to counteract a potential weakening of power that could jeopardize the kingdom's stability. The festival reaffirmed the king's connection to the divine realm and his ability to maintain cosmic order. There are instances of earlier celebrations than the typical thirty years. Queen Hatshepsut  *Hnmt-Imn-H3t-Spswt* marked her sixteenth year of rule with this festival, while Akhenaten held it shortly after his coronation ³⁶. Amenhotep III and Ramses II are also believed to have celebrated their first Sed Festivals in their 30th and 31st years of reign, respectively, followed by subsequent celebrations every 3 years ³⁷.

³⁴ Gohary, J., "Akhenaten's Sed-Festival at Karnak", Kegan, (1992), pp. 1-9.

³⁵ Wilkinson, T.A.H., "Early Dynastic Egypt", Routledge, (2005), p. 63.

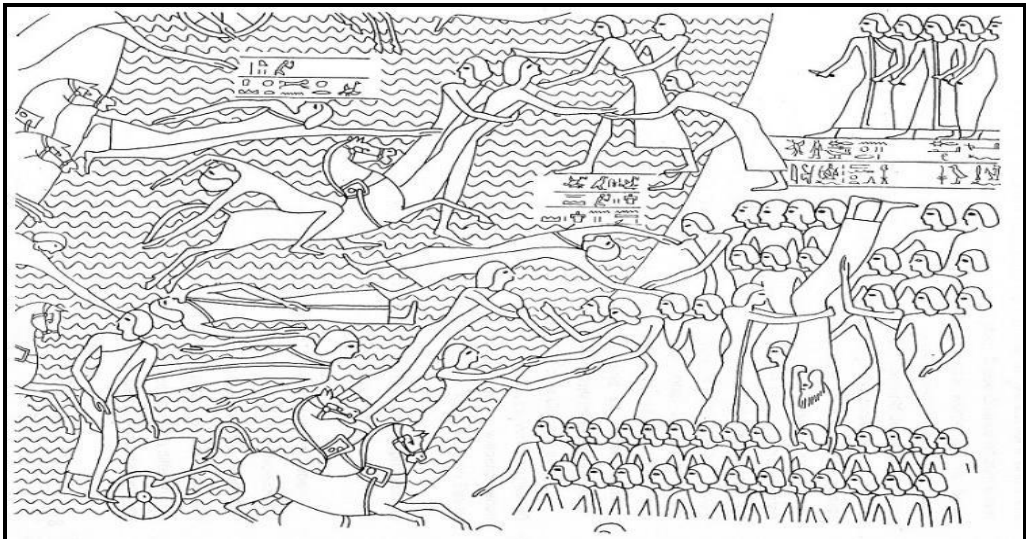
³⁶ Breasted, J.H., "Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents from the Earliest Times To The Persian Conquest", Vol. II, The Eighteenth Dynasty, University of Chicago, (1907), pp. 116–117.

³⁷ O'Connor, D.B & Cline, E.H., "Amenhotep III: Perspectives on His Reign", University of Michigan Press, (2001), pp. 16-18.

(2.1.3) Swimming:

Water played a significant role in the lives of ancient Egyptians, and swimming was a popular activity for both recreation and practical purposes. People swam in the Nile River for leisure, fishing, and training. Numerous ancient depictions showcase swimming scenes (Fig.9)³⁸, highlighting its prominence among physical activities in ancient Egypt³⁹.

The calm waters of the Nile encouraged young men to organize swimming competitions, demonstrating their skills and prowess. Swimming competitions were not limited to the Nile River; noblemen and royalty also had swimming pools in their palaces where princes received training in this sport⁴⁰.



(Fig.9) Swimming Views from the Battle of Kadesh at the Ramesseum Temple.
Hamed, A.E.A., (2015), p. 16.

³⁸ Hamed, A.E.A., “Sport, leisure: Artistic Perspectives in Ancient Egyptian Temples (II)”, *Record: Revista de História do Esporte* 8 (1), (2015), p. 16.

³⁹ Fadel, D., “Social Entertainment in Greco- Roman Egypt (Games and Sports)”, p. 2.

⁴⁰ Randolph, J., “Living and Working in Ancient Egypt”, pp. 89-94.

(2.1.4) Gymnastics/Acrobatics:

Historical and archaeological evidence suggests that gymnastics originated in ancient Egypt. Egyptians practiced this sport, including acrobatic movements for both men and women, as well as floor exercises ⁴¹. While the Chinese adopted gymnastics later, they incorporated elements of strength and military training, along with therapeutic purposes.

When gymnastics spread to Greece, it gained significant attention, particularly among the Spartans, who subjected both young men and women to rigorous training. The movements were not overly complex, primarily involving acrobatic and dance elements, rope climbing, and balance exercises. During the Roman era, certain aspects of Greek gymnastics were modified to align with their military objectives, including the introduction of the pommel horse, an apparatus still used in modern gymnastics. During the Middle Ages, gymnastics, along with other sports, experienced a decline in popularity due to the emergence of the knightly class, whose interests shifted towards equestrian pursuits and swordsmanship ⁴².

Ancient Egyptian tomb paintings and engravings provide a wealth of information about gymnastics in this civilization. These depictions showcase various movements and body positions, leading to a classification system based on the performers' actions ⁴³.

⁴¹ Decker, W., “*Sports and games of ancient Egypt*”, pp. 136-146.

⁴² Nāṣīf, Ġamīl., “*Maūsū‘at Al'al‘āb Alrīāḍīuh Almufaṣaluh Ta‘rīfuhā, Qūā‘iduhā, Naša‘tuhā Ūa-A‘mākin Intišāruhā*”, p. 128.

⁴³ Morris, E.F., “Paddle Dolls and Performance In Ancient Egypt”, *JARCE* 47, (2011), pp. 71-73.

For example, tombs of Kagemni, Meho, and Ankh-hor feature dancers in short white tunics performing a high kick position, raising one leg high while leaning back (Fig.10)⁴⁴.

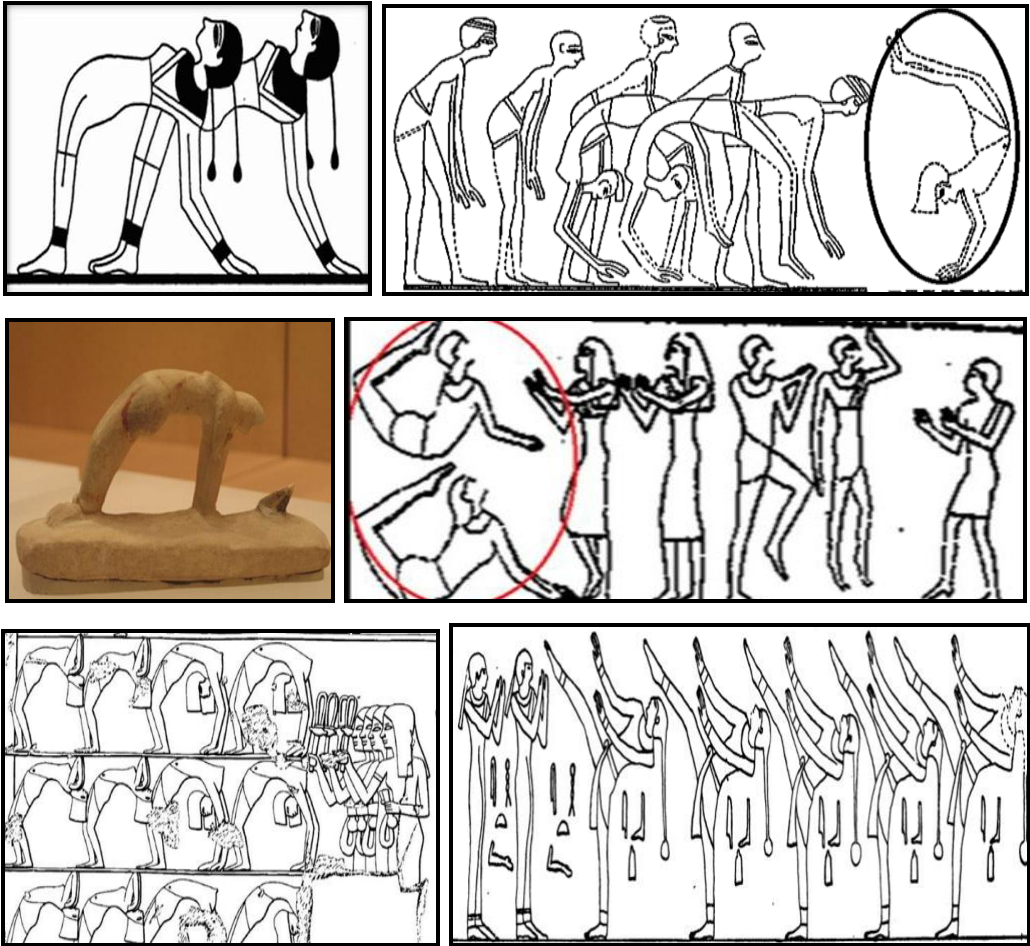


(Fig.10) High leg kick position from Meho tomb in Saqqara.
Decker, W & Herb, M., (1994), Part 2, Plate, CDXXIII, s 3.58.

Another pose is the bow position, where the body bends forward with an extended chest, bent knees, and pointed toes, with the feet grasped by the hands to form a curved shape (TT60 tomb of Antef-oker, vizier under King Senusret I). These are just a few examples of the many gymnastic movements and poses depicted in ancient Egyptian art (Fig.11)⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ Decker, W & Herb, M., “*Bildatlas zum Sport im alten Ägypten*”, Teil. 1, p. 779.

⁴⁵ Osman, S & Ezz El-Din, D & Magdy, H., “Representations of Gymnastics in Ancient Egypt, Religious conceptions, Purpose to Sport Heritage”, *JFTH* 20 (1), (2023), pp. 47-54.



(Fig.11) Multiple views and modes of gymnastics from ancient Egypt.

Osman, S & Ezz El-Din, D & Magdy, H., (2023), pp. 47-54.



(2.1.5) Boxing:

Boxing was a popular sport in both Egypt and Mesopotamia, ranking third in self-defense importance after wrestling and fencing⁴⁶. Ancient Egypt left us only one scene of boxing from Kheruef Tomb TT 192⁴⁷. Cemetery Representations of boxing in Mesopotamia predate those in ancient Egypt. Egyptian artifacts depict a limited number of boxing scenes, including a humorous depiction of a cat and a mouse boxing (Fig.12 A,B)⁴⁸.



(Fig.12a) Boxing representations in Mesopotamia are older than those in ancient Egypt.



(Fig.12b) Boxing Representations in Ancient Egypt.

Mohamed, F.A., (2020), pp.74–86.

⁴⁶ Bienkowski, P. & Millard, A., “Sport”, in: *British Museum Dictionary of the Ancient Near East*, British Museum press, London, (2000), p. 276.

⁴⁷ Decker, W., “*Sports and games of ancient Egypt*”, pp. 87-89.

⁴⁸ Mohamed, F.A., “Early evidence of Boxing in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia: a Comparative study”, *SHEDET* 7, (2020), pp.74–86.

(2.1.6) Hockey:

Ancient Egyptians engaged in a game remarkably similar to modern hockey, participating in this sport for millennia. This assertion is supported by engravings and illustrations found within the tombs of Beni Hasan. These depictions showcase two opposing teams, with each player wielding a club with a hooked end resembling modern hockey sticks but crafted from palm fronds. The ball was made of compressed papyrus and covered with two pieces of leather, each colored and forming a semicircle (Fig.13). The games mentioned above are just a few examples of the many sports enjoyed by ancient Egyptians. Numerous other depictions and illustrations showcase a variety of athletic pursuits. For instance, a renowned hunting scene from the tomb of Nebamun, an 18th dynasty official from Thebes, portrays the hunting of birds (Fig.14)⁴⁹.



(Fig.13) Hockey from the tombs of Bani Hassan.

El-Shereef, D., (2020), p. 41.

⁴⁹ El-Shereef, D., “Ancient Egyptian Sports and Fundamental Principles of Olympics”, *World History Bulletin* 36 (2), (2020), p. 40f.

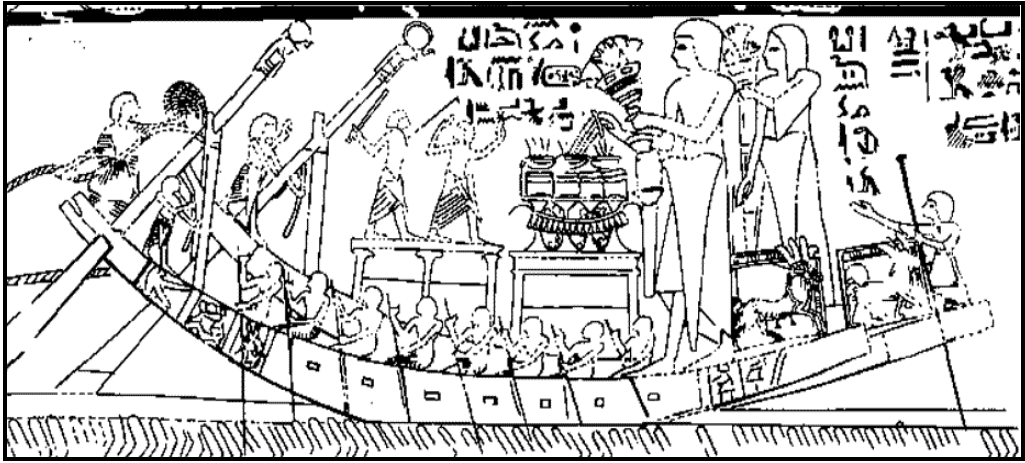


(Fig.14) View of bird hunting from the tomb of Neb-Amun.
El-Shereef, D., (2020), p. 40.

Another ancient Egyptian sport known as "tug of hoop" involved two players competing to pull a hoop quickly ⁵⁰. Additionally, Egyptians engaged in rowing (Fig.15), weightlifting, archery, javelin throwing, equestrianism, fencing, and various other sports (Fig.16) ⁵¹.

⁵⁰ McNeely, S., "Ultimate Book of Sports: The Essential Collection of Rules, Stats, and Trivia for Over 250 Sports", Chronicle Books LLC, (2012), p. 374.

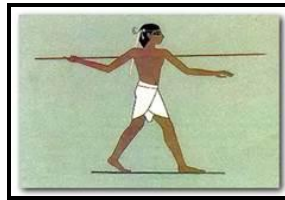
⁵¹ Elgammal, M.A., "The ancient Egyptian Sports during the Pharaoh dynasties & its relation to the ancient Greek Sports", Youth Olympic Games: Children and Sport, (2008), p. 80.



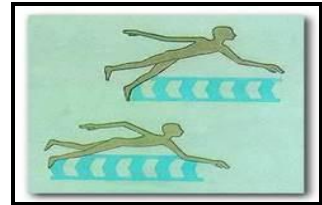
(Fig.15) Group view of rowing and caning from tomb TT 31.
Zein, M., (2022), p. 98 (Fig. 4).



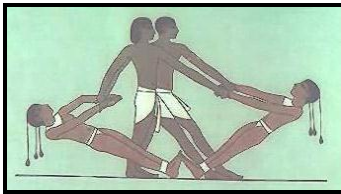
Fishing



Javelin



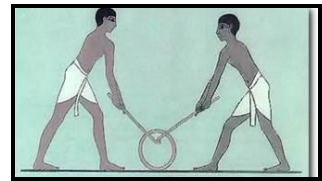
Swimming



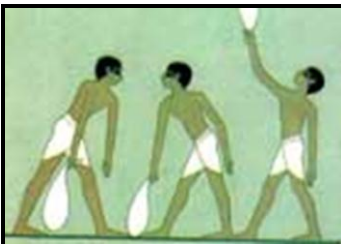
Balance



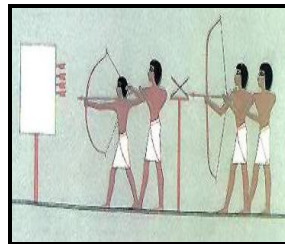
Horsemanship



Pull collar



Weightlifting



Archery



Handball

(Fig.16) Different views of the types of sports in ancient Egypt.
Elgammal, M.A., (2008), p.80.

(3) Cultural, Social, and Religious Significance of Sports in Ancient Egypt:

Sports and games played a central role in the lives of ancient Egyptians, who engaged in a diverse range of athletic activities. Depictions and inscriptions reveal their participation in sports such as wrestling, weightlifting, swimming, fishing, rowing, track and field, archery, boxing, high jump, various forms of football, and other physical pursuits. These activities extended beyond mere training sessions, encompassing the organization of local and international festivals dedicated to these games. These events attracted athletes from various cities, with winners receiving due recognition and encouragement. International and local referees from Asia and Africa oversaw these competitions. Moreover, many of the rules and regulations used in modern sports are rooted in the principles of ancient games⁵².

Therefore, sports in ancient Egypt held immense cultural, social, and religious significance. These games served as a reflection of the values and beliefs held by ancient Egyptian society, fostering social cohesion and reinforcing spiritual and religious values in the lives of the people⁵³.

Culturally, participation in sports mirrored the values of ancient Egyptian society. It contributed to the development of both physical and mental strength, promoted physical activity and overall health, and instilled positive values and ethics such as patience, discipline, endurance, and sportsmanship in youth.

⁵² Tyldesley, J.A., *“Egyptian Games and Sports”*, Bloomsbury USA, (2007), pp. 3-6.

⁵³ Fadel, D., *“Social Entertainment in Greco- Roman Egypt (Games and Sports)”*, pp. 2-6.

Socially, these activities brought people together through festivals and special events, strengthening social integration and unifying the Egyptian populace.

Religiously, sports were deeply intertwined with religious practices and associated with various deities and myths in ancient Egyptian religion. Egyptians believed that athletic pursuits helped appease the gods, bring good fortune and success, and reinforce the spiritual connection between humans and the divine⁵⁴.

In line with their belief in an afterlife that mirrored earthly life, ancient Egyptians included sports equipment and games in their tombs for entertainment in the hereafter. Sports were considered an essential part of the funerary accouterments placed with the deceased in the tomb, as evidenced by their presence in most ancient Egyptian tombs, including that of King Tutankhamun. Despite being an integral component of religious activities in ancient Egyptian society, sports were not associated with all deities or sports at all times. For instance, during hunting activities, particularly fishing with spears, bird hunting with sticks, and hippopotamus hunting, hunters did not offer sacrifices to specific gods⁵⁵.

Far from being an exclusive domain for men, sports in ancient Egypt also encompassed women's participation, as evidenced by numerous depictions of women engaging in various athletic activities. These activities included high jump, ball games, gymnastics, and more. Sports were practiced both individually and collectively in ancient Egypt, taking place in streets, fields, public squares, and dedicated sports arenas. They were also regularly incorporated into school curricula⁵⁶.

⁵⁴ Hamed, A.E.A., "Sport, leisure: Artistic Perspectives in Ancient Egyptian Temples (Part II)", pp. 1, 7.

⁵⁵ Touny, A & Wenig, S., "*Der Sport im alten Ägypten*", p. 82.

⁵⁶ Daqīl, Ḥisīn., "*Ḥikāyat Fir 'ūnīauh*", Blumania, Alexandria, (2021), p. 69.

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Home courtyards served as popular venues for sporting activities, reflecting the spaciousness of ancient Egyptian homes that allowed for indoor recreation. Narrow alleyways were also utilized for such purposes, particularly by residents of smaller dwellings, where children and adults alike engaged in games similar to those played in modern neighborhoods. Fields surrounding homes were another common setting for sports, with children and adults venturing into these open spaces to play ball games, engage in running competitions, and pursue other athletic activities.

Physical activity held a fundamental and significant role in the educational and ideological development of citizens in ancient Egypt. As depicted in the drawings and murals adorning temple walls and tombs, Egyptians actively engaged in sports and maintained physical fitness as an integral part of their religious teachings. Physical fitness was deemed a crucial prerequisite for rulership, requiring the ruler to demonstrate the ability to run a specific distance. Moreover, kings paid particular attention to the physical and military training of their children from a young age⁵⁷.

⁵⁷ Randolph, J., "Living and Working in Ancient Egypt", pp. 21-22.

Conclusion:

- **Sports played a significant role in fostering community engagement in ancient Egypt.** They promoted interaction and connection among individuals, strengthened social bonds, and enhanced cultural ties within society. Additionally, sports contributed to the physical and mental well-being of individuals, improving their overall health and mental state.
- **Sporting events drew large crowds and enthusiastic participation, further demonstrating the unifying power of sports.** These gatherings brought people together, transcending social and economic barriers.
- **Sports served as a vital source of entertainment and recreation in ancient Egypt.** Competitive events and games involving both royalty and commoners were held regularly. These competitions fostered sportsmanship and reinforced social and cultural connections.
- **Wrestling held a prominent position in community engagement within ancient Egypt.** It was a popular pastime enjoyed by all, with public matches held in stadiums that attracted audiences from all ages and social classes. These events played a significant role in building social bonds and promoting interaction among individuals.
- **Ancient Egyptians were renowned for their passion for sports and athletic activities.** These pursuits played a crucial role in their society, providing entertainment, promoting physical fitness, and maintaining overall health. Beyond their recreational value, these games and sports also held significance within the Egyptian belief system and served as a means of social connection and communication with the gods.

- **Sports were incorporated into religious, royal, and recreational festivities.** They were considered a means of approaching the gods and seeking their favor.
- **Sports held immense cultural, social, and religious value in ancient Egypt.** They played a pivotal role in strengthening social ties, fostering sportsmanship, and shaping the overall identity of ancient Egyptian society.

Abbreviations:

JAAUTH	<i>Journal of Association of Arab Universities for Tourism and Hospitality</i>
JARCE	<i>Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt (Boston, New York).</i>
JEA	<i>The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology.</i>
JFTH	<i>The Scientific Journal of the Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Alexandria University.</i>
Kemi	<i>Kêmi. Rev. de phil. et d'archéol. égypt. et copte (Paris). Continué par CahKarn.</i>
MDAIK	<i>Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts, Abt. Kairo (Wiesbaden, Mayence).</i>
MJTHR	<i>Minia Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research.</i>
PM	<i>Porter (B.), Moss (R.L.B.), Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs and Paintings, 7 vol., 1927-1995 (Oxford).</i>
Rihao	<i>Revista Del Instituto De Historia Antigua Oriental.</i>
SAOC	<i>Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilizations (Chicago, Ill.).</i>

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