

Sports and Games in the Ancient Near East:
Essays on Leisurely and Cultic Competition



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Sports and Games in the Ancient Near East

**Essays on Leisurely and
Cultic Competition**

Edited by
Shane M. Thompson
and Raleigh Heth

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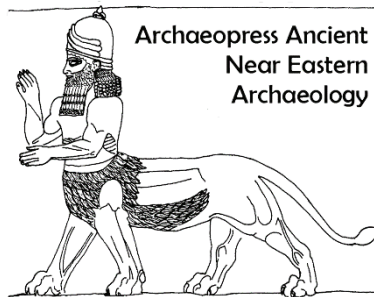
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Cover: Drawing of an impression of a Mesopotamian cylinder seal, ca. 2750–2600 BCE.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 65.1473. Drawing by Caroline Florimont after photograph.



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Abbreviations

Ä&L	<i>Ägypten und Levante</i>
AB	Anchor Bible Commentary
ABG	Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte
AF	<i>Altorientalische Forschungen</i>
AJAH	<i>American Journal of Ancient History</i>
AJSM	<i>American Journal of Sports Medicine</i>
<i>Am. Sociol. Rev.</i>	<i>American Sociological Review</i>
AMD	Ancient Magic and Divination
<i>AncW</i>	<i>The Ancient World</i>
<i>Annu. Rev. Sociol</i>	<i>Annual Review of Sociology</i>
<i>AnSt</i>	<i>Anatolian Studies</i>
<i>AntK</i>	<i>Antike Kunst</i>
AO	Museum siglum of the Louvre
AOS	American Oriental Series
AS	Assyriological Studies
<i>AuOr</i>	<i>Aula Orientalis</i>
BDB	Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
BiMes	Bibliotheca Mesopotamica
BPOA	Biblioteca del Próximo Oriente Antiguo
CAD	Chicago Assyrian Dictionary
CDLI	Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative
<i>Clin Sports Med</i>	<i>Clinics in Sports Medicine</i>
CM	Cuneiform Monographs
CUSAS	Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology
DJD	Discoveries in the Judean Desert
eBL	Electronic Babylonian Library
ePSD	Electronic Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary
ETCSL	Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature
<i>EVO</i>	<i>Egitto e Vicino Oriente</i>
FM	Florilegium Marianum
GAG	Grundriss der Akkadischen Grammatik
<i>GeogAnt</i>	<i>Geographia Antiqua</i>
GKC	Gesenius Hebrew Grammar
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
<i>IrAnt</i>	<i>Iranica Antiqua</i>
<i>JANEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History</i>
<i>JANER</i>	<i>Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions</i>

JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JARCE	<i>Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt</i>
JAS	<i>Journal of Archaeological Science</i>
JCS	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
JCSSS	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies Supplemental Series</i>
JEA	<i>Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i>
JEH	<i>Journal of Egyptian History</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JS	<i>Journal for Semitics</i>
JSH	<i>Journal of Sport History</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
KAI	Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften
KRI	Kitchen, K. A. <i>Ramesside Inscriptions. Historical and Biographical I-VIII</i>
LAPO	Littératures anciennes du Proche-Orient
MAH	Museum siglum of the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva
MDAIK	<i>Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo</i>
MSL	Materials for the Sumerian Lexicon
NABU	<i>Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires</i>
NBC	Siglum of the Yale Babylonian Collection, New Haven
NEASB	<i>Near Eastern Archaeology Society Bulletin</i>
OBC	Orientalia Biblica et Christiana
OJA	<i>Oxford Journal of Archaeology</i>
Or.	<i>Orientalia</i>
ORACC	Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus
RA	<i>Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie Orientale</i>
RIA	Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie
SAA	State Archives of Assyria
SAAS	State Archives of Assyria Studies
SANER	Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records
TCL	Textes cunéiformes, Musées du Louvre
TLA	Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae
TT	Theban Tombs
Urk.	<i>Urkunden des ägyptischen Altertums</i> , begr. von Georg Steindorff, Abt. I, 1–4: Sethe, K. <i>Urkunden des Alten Reiches</i> . Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1933; Abt. IV, 1–16: Sethe, K.: <i>Urkunden der 18. Dynastie</i> . Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961; Abt. IV, 17–22: Helck, W. <i>Urkunden der 18. Dynastie</i> . Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1955–1961
WAW	Writings from the Ancient World, Society of Biblical Literature
WBC	World Bible Commentary
ZA	<i>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und verwandte Gebiete</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

Introduction

Shane M. Thompson and Raleigh Heth

“Failure is a part of success. There is no such thing as a bed of roses all your life.
But failure will never stand in the way of success if you learn from it.”

Hank Aaron

“Any time you have an opportunity to make a difference in this world and you don’t,
then you are wasting your time on Earth.”

Roberto Clemente

The ubiquity of sports and games suggests that they play an integral part of the human experience. Whether it be a professional baseball game played in front of the eyes of a nation following a major tragedy¹ or a game of Trivial Pursuit played around the kitchen table with close family over the holidays, sports and games function as cultural expressions and identity markers across space and time.² For the editors of this volume, this certainly holds true. While we were doctoral students at Brown and Notre Dame, respectively, it was not our shared interest in the ancient Near East that sparked our friendship and desire for professional collaboration — such overlapping interests are commonplace in our narrow corner of academia. Rather, it was our life-long love of Atlanta Braves baseball that brought us together.³ Whether it be comparing the feats of Aaron to Acuña, Spahn to Glavine, McGriff to Freeman, or Mathews to Jones, we are always able to find common ground in our love for the sport’s oldest team. This shared connection has given us an easy and enjoyable reason to correspond outside of work over the years. And because we recognize the profound impact that sports and games can have on those living in the modern world, we leapt at the opportunity to examine those same subjects within the context of the ancient Near East. Because, ultimately, it matters little whether one’s interests lie in the young man from Mobile who would go on to shatter the home run record during the height of the Civil Rights Movement or the King of Uruk who spent his days in conflict with mythological creatures. Their deeds left indelible marks on their worlds, at their heart united by their respective quests for immortality.⁴

¹ On the throughgoing cultural importance of the 2001 World series, see, e.g., Marina Watts, “Why George Bush’s 2001 World Series First Pitch Meant More Than Just ‘Play Ball,’” *Newsweek*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/why-george-bushs-2001-world-series-first-pitch-meant-more-just-play-ball-1531324>; Joe Posnansky, “60 Moments: No. 11, Derek Jeter becomes Mr. November and makes New York sing,” *The Athletic*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/1932876/2020/07/17/60-moments-no-11-derek-jeter-becomes-mr-november-and-makes-new-york-sing/>.

² See further the contributions in Otmar Weiss and Gilbert Norden (eds.), *Introduction to the Sociology of Sport*, trans. K. Tobisch, International Studies in Sport and Society 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2021); Lawrence A. Winner, *The Oxford Handbook of Sport and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Richard O. Davies, *Sports in American Life: A History*, 3rd ed. (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2016).

³ On the history of the Atlanta Braves, see Mark Bowman, *The Franchise: Atlanta Braves* (Chicago: Triumph, 2024); Dan Schlossberg, *When the Braves Ruled the Diamond: Fourteen Flags Over Atlanta, 2021 World Championship Edition* (New York: Sports Publishing, 2022).

⁴ On the cultural importance of Henry “Hank” Aaron, see Howard Bryant, *The Last Hero: A Life of Henry Aaron* (New York: Pantheon, 2010); Tom Stanton, *Hank Aaron and the Home Run that Changed America* (New York: William Morrow, 2004).

Just as the topic derived from interests in the modern world, this volume itself also arose out of modern circumstances. The first seeds for this project were sown during the onslaught of the COVID pandemic in 2020. As a result, we embraced relatively novel methods to bring this group of scholars together. Participating in a series of editorial seminars over video chat, the contributors shared their ideas from their particular areas of expertise. In our opinion, this has led to a more cohesive volume than what might have arisen in more conventional circumstances, with each contributor providing editorial input for their peers. In addition, we utilized an internal peer review system, taking advantage of the wide range of scholarly expertise from our contributors. In this way, sports and games once again serve to bring people together during difficult circumstances.

As the title of this volume suggests, the ensuing essays are grouped within two thematically-oriented sections — the first discussing activities that might be broadly categorized as “sports” and the second focusing on what would be more accurately described as “games.”⁵ Of course, these words have no direct parallels in the languages of the ancient societies under examination within this volume, and the focus of this work is not on reaching collaborative definitions of “sports” and “games.” Rather, the topics discussed are those which typically fall under the headings of “sports” and “games” within the modern world, and we do not suggest that ancient cultures thought of the topics within this volume as related.

Section one opens with a pair of closely related essays addressing the little understood Mesopotamian ritual known as the *lismu*. As the authors of these essays note, it appears that a scholarly consensus has emerged around identifying the event as a “cultic footrace.” Raleigh Heth (“Racing Through the Streets: The Old Babylonian *lismu* and Athletic Competition”) challenges the validity of such a characterization through an examination of early second-millennium references to the ritual. He begins with an overview of terms semantically related to *lismu* coming from OB sources such as lexical lists, letters, love lyrics, and incantations. In doing so, he finds that these terms demonstrate a curious lack of competitive valence that might otherwise influence one to understand the *lismu* as a competitive athletic endeavor. He then turns to the sparse collection of relevant OB ritual texts that reference or allude to the *lismu* in some way, again highlighting the insufficiency of textual evidence that would allow one to understand the event as a “cultic footrace,” at least during the Old Babylonian period.

In what follows, T. E. Kelley (“Bearing the Good News: The Neo-Assyrian *lismu* as Cultic Run”) reviews the first-millennium evidence for the *lismu* to evaluate whether its characterization as a competitive athletic event is well-founded. An extensive review of the use of etymologically related terms from a variety of Standard Babylonian, Neo-Babylonian, and Neo-Assyrian texts establishes a semantic domain within which first-millennium scribes would have understood this term. Notably, very few instances within this network of related terms show any sign of a competitive element. Instead, *lasāmu* and its derivatives are used most often to express speed, eagerness, and a particular kind of service to the king. With this understanding in

⁵ It is beyond the scope of the present essay to delineate the differences between the categorization of activities as “sports” and “games.” On this distinction see, e.g., Gary Chick, “Games and Sports” in C. R. Ember, ed. *Explaining Human Culture*. Human Relations Area Files, <http://hrf.yale.edu/ehc/summaries/games-and-sports>, accessed 3/1/2025; Pierre Parlebas, “The Universals of Games and Sports,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020): 1–12; Justen O’Connor, Laura Alfrey, and Dawn Penney, “Rethinking the Classification of Games and Sports in Physical Education: A Response to Changes in Sport and Participation,” *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 29 (2022): 315–328.

hand, his inquiry proceeds to an in-depth evaluation of every Neo-Assyrian text that uses the term *lismu*. Through close reading and attention to context, he argues that the Neo-Assyrian *lismu* more closely resembles an enthusiastic run to spread the good news of blessings rather than a competitive race. Finally, the mythological correlates and the king's role in this cultic performance are evaluated, leading to the suggestion that the king is not the central participant in this particular ritual.

Heidi Köpp-Junk (“Sport and Speed on Horse and Chariot in Ancient Egypt”) turns our attention westward, addressing the use of horses and chariots in sports, as well as the question of their allure as mechanisms for travel. She notes that, in contrast to the four-wheeled transport wagon or the two-wheeled transport cart, horses and chariots quickly became accepted as locomotive innovations in ancient Egypt. This acceptance can be attributed to technical reasons such as the chariot's superior wheel load and, thus, maneuverability when compared to wagons and carts. Consequently, the chariot became a preferred means of locomotion in Egypt while wagons and carts were more often reserved for transport. Appearing in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period (ca. mid-second millennium), the most important aspect of horses and chariots was their speed, and both were considered symbolic of social status and luxury. Köpp-Junk goes on to discuss the usage of horses by messengers and scouts (i.e., when high speed was needed), as well as the chariot's role as not only a crucial military tool, but a means of locomotion, for travel, hunting, and sport in a civil context. Ultimately, she suggests that the rapid adoption of the horse and chariot in ancient Egypt, as opposed to the gradual adoption of transport wagons and carts, was rooted in emotions and brain chemistry, due to the release of endorphins during the sporting activity and the experience of speed.

Yet the task of understanding athletic competition in antiquity does not fall solely within the privilege of those who study the ancient world. Kait Pericak (“The Role of Sports Medicine in the Social Construction of the Competitive Athlete Body: An Examination in Antiquity and The Modern Era”) utilizes sociological theories and concepts to examine the role of sports medicine in the social construction of the competitive athlete body in antiquity. In doing so, she compares the goals and methods of sports medicine in the ancient world to those of the modern era. To understand sports medicine as practiced in antiquity, she first discusses animal medicine — a precursor to human treatment — and then compares these practices to the procedures of sports medicine from the current day. This essay concludes with a discussion of the benefits of such a comparative approach, illustrating that the practice of socially constructing the athlete's body to perform in competitive sport has overtaken exercise and diet, which was previously utilized to achieve long-term health.

In keeping with the focus on athletic competition in the ancient world and its ramifications for the modern world, the contribution by R. Jessie Pruett (“Beyond the Marathon: Long-distance Running in the Ancient World”) examines the antique origins of distance running. As popular legend suggests, the sport of long-distance running, or at least the modern marathon, originated with the famed and fatal run of Pheidippides after the Greek victory at Marathon. However, as Pruett suggests, there is little to no evidence that such a run ever occurred. What is more, long-distance races were not a regular component of ancient athletic competitions. Nevertheless, he demonstrates that modern runners can still find historical compatriots in the ancient world. These forerunners to modern competitors served in professional capacities

as courier runners and chariot escorts and were capable of great feats of distance, endurance, and speed. his study presents a survey of these two professions, which appear in material from across the ancient Mediterranean, to reconstruct, as much as possible, a profile of these runners. It then concludes with a discussion of one possible example of a long-distance race from Egypt that is closely related to these professional functions.

The volume's first section concludes with an essay by Shane M. Thompson ("Reinvestigating the Evidence for a Mesopotamian Ballgame"), where he discusses the textual sources for a variety of Sumerian and Akkadian terms which may represent evidence for a Mesopotamian ballgame. Thompson provides summaries of the contexts in which these terms are found, concluding that the evidence suggests a ballgame for which some reconstruction of the rules may be offered. He also includes an index which cites the references to terms related to the ballgame for use by specialists.

Section two of the volume marks a switch to essays which focus on topics appropriately designated as "games." Walter Crist opens this section with an essay ("Common Ludic Ground in Bronze Age West Asia and Northeast Africa") that discusses the well-documented board games from Bronze Age west Asia and northeast Africa. Crist notes that there were essentially four known games — mehen, senet, Royal Game of Ur/Twenty Squares, and 58 Holes. Considering the region's long tradition of interconnectedness through trade during the second half of the second millennium BCE, it should come as no surprise that there would be games that transcended cultural lines. Nevertheless, the changing regional patterns in which these games appear in the archaeological record and their relationship to realignments in economic interactions has not been adequately explored. Crist's chapter explores the evidence for these four games in this light, arguing that they served as common ludic ground that people employed to interact across social boundaries.

The section continues with a contribution by Alex de Voogt ("Graffiti Board Games in Archaeology: Scratching New Histories"), which discusses graffiti games and how they typically provide a biased record of games in antiquity. Building on studies of board games in funerary contexts, he notes that the attention to graffiti games — specifically surveys documenting game boards on rock faces and in settlements — has altered our understanding of board games. De Voogt suggests that sites with many graffiti boards allow us to understand the multiple appearances of a single game most effectively, often emphasizing that this appearance varies within the same time period and across different contexts. The potential of graffiti board games for archaeologists is more salient when graffiti boards appear in larger numbers on one or across several archaeological sites. Ultimately, he seeks to show that the ability to distinguish groups of games and time periods has not only provided insight in the history of board games but is showing increasing relevance as a tool for dating and understanding archaeological sites.

Anne Dunn-Vaturi turns the focus to iconographic depictions of games ("Board Games in the Iconography of Ancient Western Asia"). In Egypt, a wide range of sports and games are illustrated on tomb walls and papyri from the Old Kingdom onwards. In contrast, depictions of players are almost absent from the attested iconography from ancient Western Asia — one of the rare pictorial themes being related to astragals. As she notes, the lack of visual evidence is puzzling considering that board games are widely distributed from the Eastern

Mediterranean to Iran, the two most represented games being the Twenty Squares and the Fifty-eight Holes. She suggests that this may be due to the fact that some motifs have not yet been rightly identified. In her essay, she discusses new interpretations about playing scenes, arguing that possible representations of these games are suggested on small objects: namely cylinder seals from Mesopotamia and Iran dated to the 3rd-2nd millennia BCE.

In the volume's concluding essay, Carl Walsh examines how board games acted as social lubricants in cross-cultural interactions in West Asia and North Africa during the Middle Bronze Age ("Board Games, Gamers, and Gaming Networks in Middle Bronze Age Anatolia and Nubia"). Walsh builds on recent approaches to board games that have demonstrated how they are shared experiences that foster conviviality between participants, bridging cultural differences through play. A comparative examination of board game material from sites in Anatolia (Kültepe and Achemhöyük) and Nubia (Kerma) reveals how board games were used in negotiating social relationships in diplomacy and trade and were themselves widely transmitted between societies in these regions. These shared gaming practices illustrate a cross-cultural gaming network that spanned across western Asia and North Africa at the time.

The essays in this collection, then, collectively highlight several of the ways in which sports and games were present within the cultic and mythological aspects of life in the ancient Near East. As importantly, they also call attention to the role that sports and games played in ancient societies. It is our hope that the broad nature of the subject matter within this volume transcends the disciplinary boundaries dividing the various subfields of ancient Near East studies, highlighting the areas of similarity persisting across geographic and temporal divides. And in so doing, we hope that we have curated an engaging and valuable series of scholarly contributions that will result in increased attention to the comparatively understudied subject of sports and games in the ancient world.

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