

The Nascency of Recorded Movement: A Review of Sumerian Epic Poetry

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The purpose of this paper is to address the Sumerian epic poem as a source for historical sport data. The usual sources of recorded Sumerian historical data concerning sport and recreation are limited to translated cuneiform agrarian business documents, stelae, artifacts and ruins. Since Sumer was specially an agricultural nation governed by a vast religious system, the cuneiform writings are directed toward economic measurements of grain, beer, water, and supplies, and the stelae, artifacts and ruins exemplify religious and political motifs. However, there is another source available, epic poetry, which serves as an historical indicator of sport and recreation in Ancient Sumer. Typically, all other historical writings of Sumer are either cuneiform or votive inscriptions on statues, stelae, cones, cylinder seals and tablets. These writings are more prayer or offering and are limited in providing any historical accounts. In contrast, the epic poem has historical basis, about a "supposed" once lived hero and his exploits. Of course, an epic tends to be exaggerated and highly stylistic but an epic is important in that it describes the physical, social, political and even psychic factors that were present not only in the "supposed" once lived hero but also in an ancient people. Examples of such great epics worthy of historical study are the Iliad, the Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Aeneid. This paper, however, is concerned with the physical and athletic prowess of the Sumerian super hero, Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh lived in the great Sumerian state ca., 3000-2500 B.C. There are nine surviving and translated cuneiform poems and within each is a vivid description of Gilgamesh's ability to throw, sail, wrestle, box, and dance. Specifically, throwing and throw sticks are described as well as how and when they were used. Sail boats that were used for leisure are mentioned and dancing is described as to mood and period. Gilgamesh wrestled and boxed better than anyone and the epic recounts the bouts in detail. Also, a study of the content, source, period and sport reference besides possible influence on later writings and civilizations cannot be denied. In other words, Gilgamesh's abilities in sport can be traced through other cultures from the Akkadians, Hittites, Canaanites, and Hebrews to the Greeks. This paper suggests that the Sumerians not the Greeks should be given credit for the Western concept of competition.