

# Holua: Myth or Reality?

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*Holua* is considered the most spectacular of the ancient Hawaiian sports. It consisted of sliding down specially constructed and prepared slopes on large sleds. As with other cultural institutions, the sport of *holua* is rooted in fictional traditional stories which have been handed down from generation to generation through oral recitation. *Holua* racing is included in a number of legends in which a mortal deigns to compete with the fire-goddess Pele.

The most common descriptions of the sport refer to it as one for royalty, with a mainly male dominance. However, the goddess Pele plays the principal role in the legends and chieftesses may have participated in the contests. Exclusivity in the sport was maintained by the elaborate, specially constructed sleds, and the massive sled courses. The sled, or *papa*, appeared to be traditionally long and narrow, the length ranging from seven to eighteen feet. Runners were oiled to make them as slippery as possible, and the front tips were turned up, like a plow.

The courses were built on steep inclines, which varied from 200 feet to two miles. The width of the structures varied from 15 feet to 50 or 60 feet. The height could go up to seven feet. Over 40 sled courses have been identified in the Hawaiian islands, with 19 being located on the island of Hawaii. The authors conducted field work at some of these sites.

The sport then, supported in the myths was pursued avidly by the ancient Hawaiians. The most commonly accepted version for the disappearance of *holua*, and other traditional pastimes such as *maika* (bowling), *kukini* (foot-racing), *konane* (checkers) and *heenalu* (surfing) is that the missionaries discouraged such games and pastimes. This view is too simplistic. The causes that produced Hawaii's great social revolution and breakdown of its traditional culture were in operation prior to the arrival of the missionaries. In 1819 King Liholiho deliberately broke *kapua*, the tabu system, and in essence destroyed the very structure of Hawaiian society, its values and beliefs. When the religion, social customs, morals and festivals were destroyed, so ultimately were the games.