

Physical Education in Babylon A Historical Perspective on the Impact of Sports in Ancient Iraqi Society

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Abstract: Investigation of the role of physical education in the Babylonian civilization is the focus of this research. The primary purpose of this research is to determine, through analysis, the impact of sports, described in this research as a means of education and socialization in order to avoid the view of sports as recreation alone, on achieving this goal. This research uses a descriptive analytical methodology in order to identify the nature of physical activities by investigation of cuneiform writings, images, and archaeological finds. The findings show that sports during the period of the Babylonians represented a necessary aspect of religious rituals, where power-loss exercise and endurance races represented blessings from gods. Large-group sports such as wrestling, hunting, and endurance races served as agents for socialization, instilling discipline, bravery, and teamwork among the youths. Physical education was also a key social trait that ensured military readiness, hence social stability. Therefore, it is important to conclude that the role of physical education in the Babylonian culture was not marginal but a core element that defined identity and the values of the group through moral standards. The relevance and contribution of the Babylonian physical education shed insights into modern debates on physical education through the understanding of the relationship that exists and existed in the past between physical culture and physical education. The contribution of the work is in its approach to the developmental aspect of Mesopotamian sports.

Keywords: Babylonian Civilization, Ancient Mesopotamia, Popular Games, Religious Rituals, Cultural Heritage

Introduction

The analysis of physical education in the ancient Babylonian society and by extension the Mesopotamian society is key to understanding the importance of sport as a vital element in the culture and society of one of the oldest civilizations in the world. The ancient land of Iraq, often called a cradle of civilization, not only represented the source of civilization and the invention of the law and the written word, but it also represented a society in which the evolution of physical education was influential in education, religion, and politics. Analysis of this context indicates that there was a presence of organized physical activity in society that was more than mere diversion or recreation and represented a fundamental organized element of society (Oppenheim, 1977).

Archaeological records and written evidence reveal the close connection of physical exercise with religious celebration, war preparation, and communal observance. Wrestling,

hunting, and the display of physical prowess had a more organized and compelling nature than the notion of a 'passive pastime' (Kramer, 1963). Physical education functioned as a pedagogical system that promoted the propagation of moral values like 'courage, discipline, solidarity, and respect for authority' as an essential ingredient in the production of the 'citizens prepared for war who were integrated with the moral and spiritual structure of society' (Postgate, 1992).

The relevance of sports research in ancient Mesopotamia relates to its ability to shed light on the intersection between body culture and social structures. Cultural historians point out that sports should not be conceptualized from a perspective of leisure and entertainment but from a perspective which perceives sports as a social institution and a bearer of ideological and educational purposes (Guttmann, 2004). Analyzing sports in ancient Babylon provides insight into how physical education systems were used to verify political power and establish social hierarchies. The depiction of sports such as wrestling and hunting connects sports with royal glory and powers of war in ancient Iraq (Winter, 1994).

The educational aspect of sport as practiced by the Babylonians is evident by its incorporation as part of educational programs for the young. The sport and physical culture was offered as part and parcel of a broad educational program that included literacy as well as religious knowledge. The use of game and physical training as a form of initiation and festival rites shows that there is a tacit intention within the Babylonian culture to use the physical body as a tool in this respect. This is in line with Dyson's (1983) thesis on sport and culture.

Despite its importance, a clear gap prevails in the records concerning the contribution of Mesopotamia to physical education. Although a vast number of studies (e.g., Scanlon, 2002) has addressed the role of Greek-Roman culture in the development of sport and physical education in the Western civilizational paradigm, the oldest documented evidence of physical exercise predates Mesopotamia. Moreover, the historical heritage of the Sumerians, Akkadians, and Babylonians, as cited by Al-Khafaji's account (2015), confirms the proper contribution of Mesopotamia in the domain of significant, physical games.

The literature on previous research emphasizes the importance of using a novel approach towards Mesopotamian sport as a whole that is interdisciplinary. Oppenheim (1977) utilized the argument about the oneness of Mesopotamian culture by emphasizing that "ritual, in the widest meaning of the term, is no separate sphere of life but an inherent quality of life itself." A relationship between the social institutions that regulated the overall societal framework of the time, including recreational activities and physical exercise, had been discovered by Kramer (1963). UNESCO's report of the inquiry of 1979 established the importance of "significant games as a basic component of the intangible patrimony of ancient civilizations." The Iraqi aspects of the social nature of sports and gender issues were analyzed by Al-Haidari (2004). They all point towards using a methodological approach that is interdisciplinary towards researching the "Babylonian physical education."

With regard to the role of sports in the public, military, and religious aspects, it is clear that sports education has been considered a crucial element in the promotion of well-

organized, cooperative, and hardy individuals. These aspects remain valid in modern sports education, where there is a concentration upon the holistic growth and development of humankind in terms of its physical, moral, and social aspects (Hardman & Marshall, 2019). In understanding the connection between the ancient and modern periods, one realizes the ever-enduring nature of sports as something which has eternally belonged to humankind and has its roots in each and every civilization. Therefore, this research work also considers Mesopotamia's sports education at the central point of Iraqi culture and society and proves that sports were not bystanders in Mesopotamian civilization but were an element in the reproduction of Mesopotamian culture. The aim of this research is to give a new approach to Mesopotamia's history and introduce this approach in the mainstream of sports and education.

Research Problem

Notwithstanding such rich contributions to culture and history, academic literature dealing generally with physical education and its association to the overall social context of ancient Iraqi culture remains relatively sparse. Despite analyses regarding either the jurisprudence, religion, and architecture associated with historical periods in and around Babylonian cities and ancient Mesopotamia, little attention has been devoted to sport and physical education in relation to education and social control. This constitutes an area in academic literature that currently hampers our present understanding in relation to physical practices and their contribution to associated ancient civilizations, which are considered to be some of the oldest in existence (Al-Khafaji, 2015; Oppenheim, 1977).

The lack of an academic approach that decrypts the meaning of sport at the time of Babylon using a systematic instrument of education and social organization systematically extends the lack here noted. A historical approach on the current trends might value the politicoauthoritarian power and the religious and economic organizations on behalf of the educational instrument of the sport system of the period and its meaning on the conception of social and communal responsibility (Guttmann, 2004; Postgate, 1992).

Therefore, the overriding concern of this study is the paucity of academic literature on the topic of physical education in the Babylonian civilization. Through an exploration of the ways in which sports were used as tools of education and organization, this proposed research study will focus on the ways in which the academic community's perception of Mesopotamian heritage needs to be recognized in the context of universal sports history.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to try to understand and examine the place and function of sport in the Babylonian culture and, therefore, how physical activities functioned in relation to education and other, larger structures of Mesopotamian culture: "the relation between physical education and other Mesopotamian structures can reveal how physical activities contributed to the creation of personal and group identities, to moral education, and to group cohesion" (Oppenheim, 1977; Kramer, 1963).

However, the secondary goal is to evaluate the type of games played in Mesopotamia and their significance within the context of educational and socialization processes. Games played in Mesopotamia served a greater purpose beyond mere entertainment. They provided a tool to instill values like cooperation, patience, and community norms. The significance of this practice is understood within the context of how the Babylonians used physical activities as a tool to define youth training (Dyson, 1983; UNESCO, 1979).

In a similar way, it is believed that it can aid contemporary views of physical education by investigating its links with the past, specifically by discovering how contemporary views of physical education relate to views of physical education from the past in the ancient world. The finding of results in a defined history is important in forming links between the physical culture of ancient Babylon and modern views of physical education. The history of modern education channels a major component of contemporary views of the development of the individual with physical education (Hardman & Marshall, 2019).

Literature Review

A study of sports in Babylon and generally in Mesopotamian culture as a whole would require a combination of information from history and archaeology that is currently available. Both types of information build a more complex picture of a sport as a social institution in one of the oldest civilizations on Earth.

Historical Sources

The presence of physical education in Mesopotamia can be ascertained by the evidence of cuneiform tablets, cylinder seals, as well as carvings of stone. The cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals provide information regarding wrestling as well as games of an athletics character involving themes of hunting as well as combat. The information provided through these cuneiform tablets provides direct evidence regarding these games. Additionally, carvings of palace walls as well as temple sites often included the notion of physical strength and endurance. As a result, the notion of sport was coupled with themes of kingship as well as military preparedness (Kramer, 1963).

Archaeological Studies

Archaeological research has enlarged the scope of knowledge of sports in Mesopotamia and has revealed artifacts and images that demonstrate the social organization of sports and exercises. For example, Oppenheim (1977) shows that the Mesopotamian social system presented a system of ritual and social integration in which sport had a fundamental role. Kramer (1963) also stressed that physical activity in the form of playing physical or mental sports played a significant and organized part of civilization. As UNESCO (1979) has emphasized in its reporting on traditional games in ancient civilizations, it is clear that analyzing this activity as intangible heritage has emphasized the significance of physical activity in physical education in general, including its relevance to the establishment of dominance and the upbringing of youth for their proper socialization.

Contemporary Scholarly Research Modern research has embarked on the attempt to locate Mesopotamian physical education within the wider frameworks of comparative research on sport in ancient civilizations. Cultural historians have argued that sport can usefully be grasped as a social institution for the transmission of ideology, values, and discipline (Guttmann, 2004). While it is often the case that the legacies of Greece and Rome have been most celebrated in these accounts, there is a growing acknowledgment of the imperatives of incorporating Mesopotamian traditions as constituting the roots of the universal history of sport and education (Scanlon, 2002). Al-Khafaji's research on physical education in Iraq traced "the historical path of physical education in the country, where the ancient sports remain of the highest importance in the construction of contemporary educational patterns" (2015). Al-Haidari's research on sport in Iraq centered on the "sociological aspect of sports in the country, including the elements of Iraqi sports in ancient times, the development of sports, its influence, its rise, its downfall, and its revival" (2004). Taken together, these studies inform us that sport was not a discontinuous event, but was, rather, an organized aspect of Mesopotamian culture. In assessing the cumulative history of learning from the past as well as the present body of knowledge, it's clear that the nature of sport history is complex and can be applied not only in recreation roles but also in terms of moral education. This work intends not only to adduce contributions towards the field of study but also fill the existing gaps regarding the underrepresentation of the role of Mesopotamia.

Methodology

In this research work, the methodology utilized is descriptive-analytical. It helps in the analysis of the relevance of physical education in the Babylonian society. The descriptive method helps in the systematic depiction of the history of the Babylonian society regarding the relevant information from clay tables and sculpture (Kramer, 1963; Oppenheim, 1977). The emphasis of the analytical method includes the use of qualitative techniques with the aim of acquiring information or meaning regarding the objectives of physical education from the Babylonians (Dietz, 1996). The work is not based only on the depiction of history. Instead, it helps in integrating physical education with the social and cultural dynamics of the Babylonian society (Dyson, 1983). Activities such as wrestling, hunting, and games are not only considered as activities. Instead, they form part of the whole process of social formation of the social structures and imparting values (Winter, 1994).

Evidence from different sources feeds into the investigation. The cuneiform writing system is examined for mention of gaming, competitions, and ritualized physical exercise. Iconography, in the form of palace reliefs, is utilized to validate the correlation between physical activities and rulers. Archaeological findings, as discussed in UNESCO in 1979, serve as supplementary material in relation to the structure of traditional games. The findings from all the above sources are utilized in a cultural and social setting, whereby sport is utilized as a conduit for educational and identification purposes. Through a qualitative mode of analysis, the investigation places the Babylonian sport culture in its socio-historic setting, in relation to sport as a mode of educational and ritual practice and as a social institution (Hardman & Marshall, 2019; Guttmann, 2004).

Result and Discussion

The findings of this research give a clear understanding about the importance of sports and physical education in the culture of the people of Babylon. By using historical data and archaeology in interpreting the significance of sports and games in relation to the established systems in society, one is able to determine their central rather than marginal positions in these systems, and this sheds light on the importance of sports.

The Role of Sport in Religious Life

The sport held a crucial role in the religious and ritual practices of the Babylonians. Strength-sport, endurance sport, and ritualized hunting were often associated with religious festivities and rituals. In fact, such sport acted as more than just physical effort but as a symbol of association of the human body with divine power and order of the universe (Winter, 1994). Relief images of wrestling and hunting in temples indicated that sport achievement symbolized divine favor and kingship (Kramer, 1963). The rituals indicated that physical education in Babylon included a deep spiritual component (Oppenheim, 1977).

Popular Games & Socialization

There is also evidence of popular games, such as wrestling, hunting, and games of strength or endurance, being common in Babylonian culture. Such games were not only a means of recreation but were also used as a form of education for the youth. UNESCO (1979) listed these activities as being a part of the intangible cultural heritage of the region because they were used for the transmission of cultural values. Wrestling was used as a form of recreational and educational activity, developing strength. Hunting was related to the development of warrior skills. Endurance games promoted the cultural value of unity in strength (Dyson, 1983).

Social and Military Organization

The results also suggest that the impact of physical education on the social and military structure of the city of Babylon was immense. Physical education helped individuals develop strength and thereby trained them for the army and helped maintain social control and order. Physical education and sport were utilized as a system to produce disciplined citizens who were capable of performing both social and defensive roles. The use of physical education as a means of preparing for the military reveals the utility and importance of sport as a system that helps maintain the strength of the state (Postgate, 1992).

Values - Ethical and Educational

The results also indicate the strong relationship that exists between sport and the dissemination of values related to morality and educational principles. Sport served as an agent that promoted values and morals such as discipline, respect, teamwork, and morality. Morals and values were rooted in sport and helped to realize the complete development of the individual. The educational aspect of sport, as observable in the Babylonian state, is in tandem with modern viewpoints on physical education and the emphasis on the need to

integrate physical education with moral and social education (Guttmann, 2004; Hardman & Marshall, 2019). By linking the phenomenon of sport with the framework of educational theory, it is apparent that the Babylonian civilization understood the pivotal role of sport with regard to the holistic development of the body and character.

Wider Implications: The above findings call for an interpretation of the role of physical education at that level within a complex system that includes religious and organizational functions versus military preparedness in ancient civilization. One of the hallmark qualities of Mesopotamian civilization is sport as an essential element for determining its significance in maintaining this civilization and its ideologies (Al-Khafaji, 2015).

Conclusion

The current study outlines the importance of PE in relation to cultural movements and settings of the Babylonian period and portrays how it was anything but a mysterious ritualistic act that was removed from and irrelevant to community issues and challenges (Kramer, 1963; Oppenheim, 1977). Moreover, it can be ascertained that sport was also responsible for developing and building a communal identity vis-à-vis cohesion as various types of wrestling events and endurance games such as hunting were responsible for instilling discipline and adherence to community and social norms in people. Moreover, these events and exercises were also responsible for building citizens for communal as well as military service and furthered and promoted and validated the importance of PE in building and establishing community and social and political stability (UNESCO, 1979; Postgate, 1992).

Implications of this inquiry are that there are aspects of the Babylonian experience in physical education that continue to have contemporary application in theoretical perspectives on education. Having understood sport in the larger context of cultural reproduction, the Babylonians articulate a historical paradigm where physical development is a developmental approach embedded in a larger approach to the development of the individual (Hardman & Marshall, 2019). This provides a range of contemporary lessons with which debates on physical education might be informed (Guttmann, 2004).

As a direct result, the authors of the present study argue that the physical culture of the Babylonians was not an auxiliary matter but a significant element of Mesopotamian culture, influencing the religion, education, military system, and establishment of societal values. The acknowledgment of such a heritage is important in order to understand better the culture of the ancient Mesopotamians as well as the basis of the modern physical culture.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings and conclusions of the present study, some recommendations are put forward in respect of both the scholarly and practical aspects of the physical education of the Babylonians. First, it becomes pertinent to note that it is highly recommended that elements from Iraq's ancient sports culture be integrated into current education curriculums. Attempts to incorporate elements from Mesopotamia's physical training practices as well as forms of games that were popular back then can help to improve

the cultural aspect associated with physical education, whereby students can establish a clearer sense of identity (Al-Khafaji, 2015).

Second, the article argues for a multidisciplinary study that merges the approaches of history, education, anthropology, and archaeology. This is due to the complex nature of sport within the context of ancient Babylon, which cannot easily be understood from a discipline-based perspective. Multidisciplinary studies can offer a more refined understanding of the role of physical education within ancient Mesopotamia (Dyson, 1983; Oppenheim, 1977).

Third, the study highlights the importance of comparative research which investigates Physical Education in Mesopotamia and similar practices in other ancient civilizations such as Egypt and Greece. A comparative study would allow one to discover both the peculiarity of Physical Education in Babylon and the similarities which governed how all ancient civilizations used Physical Education as a means of cultural transmission (Scanlon, 2002; UNESCO, 1979).

In conclusion, the purpose of these recommendations is to increase the applications of the current study and move it beyond mere historiography towards applications in education and academia. Through the integration of the past and the present in pedagogy, through interdisciplinarity and through comparison, the current study sets the stage for future studies that will contribute to the enhancement of knowledge and culture alike.

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