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ACROBATIC GYMNASTICS IN GREECE FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO THE PRESENT DAY

Key words: acrobatic gymnastics, Greece, bull-leaping.

ABSTRACT

The study outlines the history of acrobatic gymnastics as it emerges diachronically over the years and through historical records. Bibliographical sources point to Germany as the birthplace of acrobatic gymnastics and, in particular, to Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852) as the creator of first gymnastic equipment and gymnastic exercises in 1811. However, these origins of acrobatic gymnastics are arguable. Bibliographic research on the Minoan (2.600 BC) and Mycenaean (1.600 BC) eras, Homeric years, classical years, the Byzantine era, Renaissance and Enlightenment and thereafter, reveals that acrobatic gymnastics is definitely rooted in ancient Greece.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most modern types of gymnastics, acrobatic gymnastics, has its roots in Minoan bull-leaping of ancient Crete¹. If we examine the role acrobatic gymnastics played for different folks who lived thousands years ago, we might come to some useful conclusions. The goal of this study is to take a broad approach to the earliest history of acrobatic gymnastics using bibliographical sources and to explore critically the myth as well as the reality of the origins of this sport event.

In order to survive, man had to display various physical abilities in e.g. running, leaping, throwing objects, etc. The main human need was to find food, thus to satisfy this need, man hunted

animals and killed them with stones or other objects. When man realized this need, he attempted to increase his physical abilities and talents to facilitate his fighting and survival skills, whereas at the same time he used his talents for both therapeutic and recreational goals.

As early as 2500 BC in China, people used gymnastic exercises exclusively for therapeutic causes and longevity. Thanks to ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian art, we can trace the existence of human sport activities back to 3000 BC. These activities were wrestling, bastinado, boxing, acrobatics, archery, horse riding, rowing and different ball games. The administration of athletic events was restricted to the palace court, whereas sports were addressed mostly to members of elite classes. In Crete, during the Minoan period, these activities took place near the royal palace. Minoan activities included racetracks, boxing, wrestling and

¹ It was a Minoan field event (a sport) in which an athlete leaped on the back of a running bull.

acrobatic exercises over the bull, so-called bull-leaping, performed by the elite class. The Mycenaean culture adopted all the Minoan sports, which were then transmitted to Cyprus. The Mycenaeans indicated their special preference of martial arts, wrestling and boxing, and they also introduced harness racing. Both Homer's epic poems contain references to contests from the Mycenaean period.

Physical exercises were known very early all over the world. The prehistoric peoples and cultures such as Mayans, Incas and Aztecs did some exercises, e.g. hunting. However, the collected data concerning these peoples does not provide us with sufficient details. On the other hand, data on physical exercises in other cultures such as the Sumerians, Persians, Phoenicians, Chinese, Indians, Japanese and Jews have been plentiful.

ACROBATICS AND SPORTS IN NON-GREEK ANCIENT WORLD

The Sumerians were a peaceful people, who lived from 4000 to 2800 BC between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. They developed a remarkable culture, including various physical exercises. The Sumerians domesticated the horse, invented the wheel and by combining the two devised the chariot. They were conquered by the warrior Babylonians and the Assyrians, pre-occupied with martial arts.

The Egyptians also created a magnificent culture. Martial exercises were known to be practiced in ancient Egypt as early as 10.000 BC. About the fourth millennium BC the Egyptians achieved a remarkable utility of exercise. Exercise techniques can be seen in numerous hieroglyphic representations. Sports performed by ancient Egyptians included competitive swimming, gymnastics, acrobatics, weightlifting, cavalry battles, harness racing, wrestling, hunting, marine contests, sailing, rowing, chess playing and boxing.

The Chinese culture dates back to the fourth millennium BC and was characterized by its isolation from other world cultures. Gymnastics emerged in China around 2700 BC as a ritual known as kung-fu. During the first millennium BC also other sports appeared in China such as boxing, swimming, wrestling, ski racing, polo and hunting.

In the history of India athletics played a significant cultural role between 3.000 BC and the

Buddha's era (560-483 BC). From the earliest times exercises in India were directly related to religion as a medical and recreational medium.

On the basis of historical and modern research we know that the Phoenicians adopted physical exercises, more specifically harness racing, as a daily practice around 2000 BC. The ancient Jews practiced racing, wrestling, swimming and dancing. They considered the role of physical exercise and athletic contest as crucial for the foundation of a powerful nation. One of the earliest sports clubs in history was founded by the Jews.

The history of Japanese physical culture begins in the 6th century BC and represents a great influence from the Chinese. The Japanese created numerous combat sports and they were known for their excellent military training. These sports included dueling, horse riding and archery. Additionally, they invented the well-known martial art of jiu-jitsu.

The military Persian culture developed equestrian sports and approximately in the 8th century Persians were known to play polo on horses. Additionally, they enjoyed dancing, swimming and acrobatic exercises, the latter under Egyptians' influence.

ACROBATIC GYMNASTICS IN ANCIENT GREECE

Overview

In ancient Greece gymnastics was considered an indispensable part of young men's education. In Sparta it was also a part of women's education. Both boys and men oiled their bodies and exercised naked, either while drilling in the palaestra or taking part in local or pan Hellenic contests. Because of that Greek women were not permitted to watch men's gymnastic contests. The Greeks invented athletic games and turned them into a competitive sport. In ancient Greek the verb *αθλέω* (aethleo) meant "I am an athlete-player". Winning was an enormous credit not only for the athlete but also for his area of residence, and it was not an end in itself, nor a way to gain huge financial benefits as it is today.

Acrobatic gymnastics in the Minoan era

As far as the Minoan era (2800-1100 BC) is concerned, the Cretans were known to practice such sports as bull-leaping, acrobatics, boxing and wrestling. Ancient Greeks as well as many other peoples and cultures practiced acrobatics with or without equipment (ribbons, balls, ropes, hoop, clubs, sticks etc), and with animals (bull-leaping). In the large central courts of the Minoan palaces, acrobatic demonstrations took place, which can be considered antecedents of present-day floor exercises. Additionally, Minoan bull-leaping can be considered the antecedent of modern equestrian vaulting. Excavations at Mycenaean sites brought into light numerous works of art, for example, vessel and wall paintings representing scenes of life in the island in the pre-historical era. The findings from those excavations show that the Minoans enjoyed activities such as acrobatics, bull-leaping, dancing, boxing and archery. Bull-leaping acquired a prominent position in the Minoans' awareness, and was the most commonly depicted physical activity².

Bull-leaping³ was a complicated acrobatic activity of young boys and girls during which participants performed spectacular leaps on the back of running bulls. The bulls were running on athletes' side and sometimes the course of the event turned dangerous. Initially, an athlete grabbed the bull's horns and thanks to the momentum given by a violent upward jerk of the animal's neck, executed an acrobatic flip.

Although other prehistoric Egyptian and eastern cultures also knew plays with the bulls, bull-leaping reached the level of mastery in the Mycenaean Crete. The basis of bull-leaping was the somersault, an acrobatic exercise with its roots in ancient Egypt. Bull-leapers performed spectacular flips in the air. Their artistic representations (statuettes, wall-paintings) can be found not only in Crete, but also in other areas of Greece (Pylos, Tirintha) and in Asia Minor (Smyrna).

² Mouratidis. History of physical education and sports of the ancient world. 59-60 (2008).

³ The word *tavrokathapsia* (bull-leaping) consists of two words (*tavro* – bull and *kathaptw* = peal over an animal's saddle) and comes from Angello Mosso's *The Palace of Crete and Their Builders*, London 1907, A. Evans, *The Palace of Minos*, London 1930, III, pp. 71-431.

Bull-leaping was practiced as a ritual or initiation procedure, religious activity, or simply as entertainment. The protagonists in this spectacle were the bull and the bull-leapers. It was a ritual, in which the Minoans gave thanks to the mother earth, while children's confrontation with the bull prepared them to become brave men. The goal was to make a flip to glorify athletes' stalwartness, daring and flexibility.

Bull-leaping techniques

Based on J.C. Younger's study of 54 bull-leaping performances three different leaping techniques could be discerned. In the first technique, the athlete grabbed the bull's horns, executed a back flip onto the bull's back and then dismounted the animal. In the second technique, the athlete leaped, preferably from a high level, on the bull's head, he fell with his hands on the back of the bull, then executed a back flip and dismounted. The third technique was depicted in only one representation. The bull-leaper is delineated over the bull's tail. Probably, this last representation does not ascribe to a realistic technique but it was an artistic rendition dictated by the wall painting purposes. The impressive Bull-Leaping Fresco from Knossos from about the mid-15th century BC seems to be a combination of the first two techniques.

Bull-Leaping Fresco

The Bull-Leaping Fresco is an impressive attestation, which brings up clearly and truthfully the reality of the sport of bull-leaping in ancient Crete. The fresco was found on the east side of the palace of Knossos in the courtyard of the stone mouth. Its main subject is a scene of bull-leaping, surrounded by images of stone and abstract linear motifs. The ensemble as a whole is two-dimensional, except for the strong lines in the woman's chests, legs and thighs, which reflect the artist's attempt to deliver volume and depth, a rare attempt for this period. It is on display at the Heraklion Archaeological Museum, whereas its photocopy crowns an exhibition room in Knossos palace. The pieces that are clearly depicted in the picture are original. On an Egyptian blue background, in the centre of the scene, is a bull, painted in pink-red ochre, lime and brown, or yellow ochre with coal – these colors may have been chosen for their effect, though it is also

possible that the use of red ochre and other Neolithic colors is linked to contemporary ideas of death. The bull is suspended in the air, because of the artist's wish to capture its brash aggressive movement – bulls often continued to be represented that way right up to the creation of photography. On either side of the bull is a woman, one of whom holds the bull's horns and the other holds out her arms, while a man is on the bull's back. Both sexes are in the same costume (probably since a more complex garment could get entangled in the bull's horns) and they are differentiated by differences in the anatomy and color used for their skin (the man is in red ochre, the women white, as in Cycladic and Mycenaean frescoes). The man's movement is dynamic, the figures' ears are fully formed and (as in most Bronze Age art) the bull's and humans' eyes are bird-like in appearance. The fresco can be linked to different visual elements in other art forms, such as a steatite bull-headed rhyton from 1600 BC. Additionally, the fresco shows the bull running with its penis in the state of erection. This observation is a significant one as the technicians of Knossos, painters or carvers, did not fail to emphasize this detail.

The researchers of the Minoan culture believe that bull-leaping was neither a simple show of physical abilities, nor a simple spectacle that made viewers enjoy themselves. In contrast, specialists in religious issues of the ancient world have emphasized its religious character. The latter could be attributed to all the athletic activities of Minoan Crete. It becomes obvious that they were either a part of a ceremony of young elitists (coming of age) or a kind of a ritual spectacle organized by the palace. Such performances were probably watched by large audiences. Apart from bull-leaping, in the 16th century BC, a popular sport was also the somersault, which had come to Crete from the East, in particular, from Egypt. The somersault performers were young men wearing luxuriant aprons with tasseled belts, often with bracelets on their hands. They supported their body with their hands on the ground and stunned audiences with their liveness and mastery of the flip. Apart from simple acrobatics, they also executed more perplexing acrobatic forms⁴.

⁴ According to G. Sakelarakis, it is not accidental that the somersault is still regarded today in Crete as an exhibition of mastery and bodily flexibility. George Sakelarakis. The prehistory of the matches. The Olympian Games in ancient Greece, p. 16.

Acrobatic gymnastics in the Mycenaean era

Like in Minoan Crete, in Mycenaean Greece (1600-1100 BC) sport games were an integral element of religious ceremonies and ceremonies of fertility. The sports of Minoan Crete were transferred to Mycenaean Greece, where they were not only sanctioned but also technically improved. The Mycenaean differed from the Minoans in terms of their love for war and inclination to hunting, which for them was a kind of a sport game. The nature of Mycenaean society, which was characterized by intense martial hue, resulted in the rapid development of sport games such as harness racing and racing⁵.

The somersault was not a beloved sport for the Mycenaean, and bull-leaping was regarded as a funeral sport. However, wrestling and boxing became the most famous sport games for the Mycenaean, who thereupon brought them to Cyprus. Sports are depicted in many Mycenaean works of arts. Bull-leapers, boxers and wrestlers are often depicted on signets, rings, wall paintings and vessels from the 13th century BC.

Acrobatic gymnastics in Homeric and classical years

In the Homeric times we find references of the words "kivistiras" and "arneftiras". Both words refer to acrobats of that period (Hthon, 1998). The first type of acrobatics consisted of turning on one's foot like a potter's wheel, or on hands with the legs in the air (like in a handspring). At symposiums, the acrobats entertained the guests with their spectacular performances. The other category of acrobatics consisted of performing twists in the air (Sakelariou 1947, Chrisafis 1931, Chrisafis 1965).

The two great Homeric epic poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey, offer a complete and detailed description of all sport games from the period such as harness racing, wrestling, boxing, and racing, discus throwing, archery and dart throwing. Homer refers very often to the acrobatics and dancing of the antecedents and he informs us about the people of Faiakes⁶, who apart from acrobatics and music,

⁵ Sakelarakis G. "The prehistory of the Games", Olympic Games in ancient Greece, p. 22.

⁶ Faiakes is a former municipality on the island of Corfu, Ionian Islands, Greece.

also performed dances with a ball with a musical accompaniment.

Some years later, Athenians also indicated a special interest in acrobatics. Herodotus reports that the Athenians elitists did not disdain the practice of acrobatics. The acrobats exhibited their abilities at the Panathenaic Games, as depicted on a number of Attica vessels. The National Library of Paris possesses an ancient Panathenaic vessel from the Necropolis of Kamirou depicting acrobats in action (Sakelariou, 1947). According to Johnny (1989) it was made in Athens in the 6th century BC to give credit to such complex acrobatic feats as performing acrobatic exercises on a moving chariot.

Particularly interesting is also the ancient “dance”, which was a combination of dance, gymnastic elements and occasionally acrobatic elements. This dance was accompanied with flute music to which the dancers often adjusted the rhythm of their movements. Due to their difficulty, these dances differed from other dance categories of ancient Greece because they demanded intensive practice, mastery of movements and excellent performing abilities. This was the reason why they were not performed by many dancers, but by a few professionals.

Homer, Xenophon of Athens, Herodotus, Pollux⁷, Loukianos and many other ancient philosophers and authors describe elements of all these dances and scenes with acrobats who performed them at Symposiums⁸.

Acrobatic gymnastics in the Byzantine era

In the Byzantine period, although the Christian religion stood in opposition to sport games, the church showed tolerance towards archery, wrestling, footraces, fencing, dancing and acrobatics. The favorite sports of the Byzantines were harness racing and horse riding. The basic gymnastic venue in Byzantium was the hippodrome, which at the same time was the center of the Byzantines’ political life. In the hippodrome the Byzantines could praise or condemn the Emperor’s deeds. During the breaks between the hippodrome games, many acrobatic demonstrations took place. A Byzantine author, Nicephorus Gregoras (1299), mentioned that the acrobats

performed full twists and other exercises similar to present-day regular gym exercises.

In the Middle Ages, after the Olympic Games had been suppressed by Theodosius the Great in 394 AD (Johnny, 1989), acrobatic gymnastics dropped out of schools and faded out. The schools of that period were transformed into “a faithful servant of intellectual and religious education” (Andreopoulou 1975).

Renaissance and Enlightenment

In the Renaissance (13th – 16th cent.) and the Enlightenment periods (17th – 18th cent.) physical exercises were revived, endorsed by such great European thinkers as Petrus Vergenius (1349-1420), Vittorio da Feltre (1378-1446), Hieronymus Mercurialis (1530-1606), Erasmus (1466-1536), Luther Marting (1483-1546) and others. Friedrich Ludwig Jahn is regarded by many as the father of gymnastics. Also Adolf Spiess (1810-1858) was considered to be the founder of women’s gymnastics. Other revivers of gymnastics included Thomas Elvot (1491-1547) and Thomas Arnold (1795-1842) in England; Francois Rabelais (1483-1553), Silvio Antoniano (1477-1547), Francois Fenelon (1651-1715), Clement Joseph Tissot (1750-1826) and George Hebert in France; and Henrik Ling (1776-1839) and Josef Gotterid Thulin (born in 1875) in Sweden (Andreopoulou, 1975; Johnny 1989; Mouratidis 1990; Nikitaras 2001; Satratzemis 2000; Chrisafis 1965). Apart from the gymnastic revival tendencies in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, there are also numerous historical records, such as Jahn’s (1778-1852), and illustrations that indicate fascination with gymnastics and acrobatics, as well as objections to gymnastic exercises, e.g., Franz Nachtgall (born in Copenhagen 1777).

Return to classical education

In the 17th century, benevolent teachers returned to Greek classical education models. Although many authors consider Friedrich Ludwig Jahn to be the father and the founder of gymnastics, literature proves that he was preceded by the Philanthropists, who had introduced such exercises as high bar, balance, floor exercises, rings, dangles, and pommel horse that they referred to as “gymnastics” into the educational system. Johann Christoph Friedrich GutsMuths was one of Jahn’s predecessors. According to Kaimakis (1998),

⁷ A son of Zeus in Greek mythology.

⁸ Douka Stella. *The character of “dance” of classical antiquity*. Doctoral dissertation, Thessaloniki, pp. 165-168.

GutsMuths was “the linchpin between ancients’ gymnastics and Jahn’s system”. Borrmann (1978) claims that “Jahn took the ideas and the thoughts which Muths had worded”. On the other hand, Zwag (1981) reports that Ludwig Jahn was an experienced globetrotter who was well-aware of the attitudes of people of his times.

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