

# SOME ASPECTS OF SPORT IN RITUAL AND RELIGION IN ANCIENT EGYPT

ALGUNOS ASPECTOS DEL DEPORTE  
EN EL RITUAL Y EN LA RELIGIÓN  
EN EL ANTIGUO EGIPTO

WOLFGANG DECKER

DEUTSCHE SPORTHOCHSCHULE KÖLN  
W.DECKER@DSHS-KOELN.DE

---

## RESUMEN

El ritual y la religión están conectados al deporte del Faraón. Durante el festival del jubileo, el rey que iba envejeciendo debía demostrar su aptitud en un ritual de carreta que también le daba nuevos poderes. En el Reino Nuevo, el Faraón es comparado con Montu, el dios de la guerra, cuando practica deporte, una calificación para asumir el título de gobernante. Inscrito en la estela de Amenofis II en la Esfinge, el texto egipcio más largo que describe el deporte, se menciona a los dioses Montu (en seis ocasiones), Amón (en cinco) y Atón (en tres), mientras que Astarté, Geb, Horus, Maat, Ra, Reshef y Seth sólo son mencionados una vez cada uno. Más aún, puede resultar sorprendente descubrir que el derecho a

## ABSTRACT

Ritual and religion are connected to the sport of Pharaoh. During the jubilee festival, the ageing king had to demonstrate his fitness in a running ritual which also gave him new powers. In the New Kingdom, Pharaoh is compared with Month, the god of war, when practicing sport, a qualification for assuming the mantle of ruler. Enscribed on the Sphinx-stela of Amenophis II, the longest Egyptian text depicting sport, the gods Month (six times), Amun (five times) and Atum (three times) are mentioned, whereas Astarte, Geb, Horus, Maat, Ra, Reshef and Seth are only mentioned once each. Further, it may be surprising to discover that the right to rule among

governar entre los dioses era disputado dos veces por medio de la competición deportiva, como es el caso en el relato mitológico titulado “El conflicto de Horus y Seth”.

the gods was disputed twice by means of sporting competition, as is the case in the mythological story entitled “The Conflict of Horus and Seth”.

---

**PALABRAS CLAVE**

ritual, religión, deporte, Reino Nuevo, faraón, Egipto, dioses.

**KEY WORDS**

ritual, religion, sport, New Kingdom, Pharaoh, Egypt, gods.

---

Fecha de recepción: 28/04/2017

Fecha de aceptación: 12/03/2018

---

THE GREEK HISTORIAN HERODOTUS, who in the fifth century BC travelled within the Nile valley, was greatly impressed by the religiosity of the Egyptians (Hdt. II 37: θεοσεβέες ἐόντες μάλιστα πάντων ἀνθρώπων)<sup>1</sup> and by the pleasure they derived through organizing festivals (Hdt. II 58: πανηγύριας δὲ ἄρα καὶ πομπὰς καὶ προσαγωγὰς πρῶτοι ἀνθρώπων Αἰγύπτιοι εἰσι οἱ ποιησάμενοι καὶ παρὰ τούτων Ἕλληνες μεμαθήκασιν<sup>2</sup>. This close relationship to ritual and religion also existed in the field of sport,<sup>3</sup> as exemplified by the sport of pharaoh. For the Egyptians, pharaoh was the central figure dominating the world, warranting the life of his subjects and being responsible for the prosperity of the entire country. With the Egyptian king's dogma<sup>4</sup> defining pharaoh as invincible and as a *victor perpetuus*<sup>5</sup> in war and in sport, nobody dared to risk competing against him as they feared a sure defeat. *Vice versa*, there is validity to this claim as competing against pharaoh was prohibited on the grounds that his superiority as king was never allowed to be put in doubt.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, pharaoh used sport as a means to demonstrate his exploits in this area, but never against an actual rival.

In the scope of this lecture, some aspects that show the sporting king in a ritual and religious context have been selected to aid in our understanding of this phenomenon. We will see that the ritual attitude of the sporting king represents a constant factor of Egyptian history, whereas the religious aspect has arisen from an actual historical event. Finally, a myth showing two gods who are fighting by means of a sporting competition for the task of deciding the ruler of gods will be presented.

---

1. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their acute criticism and valuable suggestions. – (*They are very godfearing, more than other people*).

2. (*Festivals and processions and festival parades the Egyptians organized as first of all men, and from them the Greeks did learn it*).

3. For the Egyptian term see CANNUYER, C., “À propos de l'expression égyptienne *šmḥ -ib*, ‘se divertir’”, CANNUYER, C./FREDERICQ-HOMES, D./RIES, J. e. a. (eds.), *L'autre, l'étranger. Sports et loisirs* (Acta Orientalia Belgica XVI), Bruxelles/Louvain-la-neuve/Leuven 2002, 123-134; collection of iconographic sources including such relating to pharaoh by DECKER, W./HERB, M., *Bildatlas zum Sport im Alten Ägypten. Corpus der bildlichen Quellen zu Leibesübungen, Spiel, Jagd, Tanz und verwandten Themen* (Handbuch der Orientalistik I, XIV.1-2), 2 vols., Leiden/New York/Köln 1994.

4. HORNUNG, E., “Vom Geschichtsbild der alten Ägypter”, IDEM, *Geschichte als Fest. Zwei Vorträge zum Geschichtsbild der frühen Menschheit*, Darmstadt, 1969, 9-29; BARTA, W. “Königsdogma”, *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* III, 1980, 485-494; Schoske, S., *Das Erschlagen der Feinde*, Diss. München, 1982.

5. PETSCHER, S/FALK, S. (eds.), *Pharao siegt immer. Krieg und Frieden im Alten Ägypten. Ausstellungskatalog, Gustav-Lübke-Museum, Hamm, 21. März – 31. Oktober 2004*, Bönen, 2004.

6. DECKER, W., *Pharao und Sport*, Mainz, 2006, especially 6-11.

## THE RUN DURING THE JUBILEE FESTIVAL

The jubilee festival<sup>7</sup> was one of the most important festivals in Ancient Egypt. It established the renewal of pharaoh's rule. This festival is designated in Egyptian as *hb-sd* (heb-sed), respectively in Greek as τριακονταετηρίς, which means 'festival of thirty years'. This temporal span refers to the time which passed after the beginning of the king's reign.<sup>8</sup> Normally 30 years later however, pharaoh was less inclined to be at the peak of his physical fitness. Further, with his power weakened, this spelled out disaster for his role as guarantor of world order. Rather, he ought to have been restored into the state of his physical *acme*. In Ancient Egypt, however, this was possible by means of a ritual documented from the very beginning of Egyptian history until its end.<sup>9</sup> The central element of this festival was ingeniously a 'run of pharaoh', which was obligatory for him. The representations, which mostly come from carvings in reliefs of the running pharaoh, show him in an astride stance, where he is running down a triplicated mark of half rounds clothed in an apron and wearing a crown.<sup>10</sup>

In the courtyard of the pyramid of Neterikhet (= Djoser) (3<sup>rd</sup> dynasty, reign 2690-2670 BC) at Saqqara, such a race course as depicted for the run of the jubilee festival, built from durable stone, has been preserved.<sup>11</sup> Thus, even today pharaoh should still be able to celebrate this important festival from the afterlife. In the southern court of the step pyramid, the eldest pyramid of Egypt, one can see, even today after nearly 5000 years, two of the at the time typical triplicate half rounds in stone limiting the race course and inviting one to attempt the ancient ritual.<sup>12</sup> These marks in the shape of the capital letter B, with a side-length of circa 11 m (21 Egyptian cubits), are placed in a north-south direction within a distance of approximately 55 m, which equals 105 Egyptian cubits.<sup>13</sup> The aging king had to fulfill a soluble task when he had to ritually complete rounds of the circuit. Certainly,

---

7. Basically HORNING, E./STAEHELIN, E., *Studien zum Sedfest* (Aegyptiaca Helvetica 1), Genf, 1974; HORNING, E./STAEHELIN, E., *Neue Studien zum Sedfest* (Aegyptiaca Helvetica 20), Basel, 2006.

8. There are numerous examples that the festival could have taken place earlier, for instance in a critical situation of the office-holder or during a crisis of the state.

9. DECKER/HERB, *Bildatlas* (314 examples). For the presumable sequence of the ritual see HORNING/STAEHELIN, *Neue Studien*, 91-95.

10. Insightful photograph in LANGE, A./HIRMER, M., *Ägypten. Architektur, Plastik, Malerei in drei Jahrtausenden*, München/Zürich, 1978, pl. 15; LAUER, J.-PH., "Les édicules en forme de D du complexe monumental de la pyramide à degrés", BERGER, C./CLERC, G. /GRIMAL, N. (eds.), *Hommages à Jean Leclant*, vol. 4: *Varia* (Bibliothèque d'étude 106/4), Kairo, 1994, 183-198, Fig. 1 (p. 185).

11. KESSLER, D., "Die politische Geschichte der 3. bis 8. Dynastie", SCHULZ, R./SEIDEL, M., *Ägypten. Die Welt der Pharaonen*, Köln, 1997, 41-46, pl. 8 (p. 46) showing the race course from a bird's-eye view; DECKER/HERB, *Bildatlas*, I, A 9.

12. LAUER, *Hommages à Jean Leclant*, 4, Fig. 2-5.

13. One Egyptian cubit corresponds to 52.5 cm; for the measures see LAUER, *Hommages à Jean Leclant*, 4, 183.

from historical derivation, this task was one he undertook without any rival. The result of the ritual was enormous; when running around the marks pharaoh renewed his possession of the district for which he ruled. Simultaneously, he proved when running that he was still physically able to exercise power and to protect the lives of the Egyptians. The running ritual magically renewed his strength, which he needed to fulfill the claims of the dogma of the king.<sup>14</sup> Without doubt, the run was conducted without any rival but rather as a bare demonstration of the king's physical power. Significantly, this demonstration of power was not in the form of competition, as this was excluded by means of the king's dogma. It should be remarked that there are three reliefs under the step pyramid,<sup>15</sup> respectively in the southern tomb,<sup>16</sup> showing pharaoh performing the running ritual during the jubilee festival.<sup>17</sup> In these scenes, as in all parallels one can see three half-rounds before and behind the running king.<sup>18</sup> However, no race course of the historical festivals alike the pattern of stone near the pyramid of Djoser has been preserved. We must assume however, that they were made from some transient material and that this did not survive the times.

#### GODS AND THE SPORT OF KINGS IN THE NEW KINGDOM

At the beginning of the New Kingdom (18<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> dynasties; 1550-1070 BC), the war of independence against the Hyksos, the first foreigners who overwhelmed the Egyptians for a determinable period, took place. When Egypt once again got back its autonomy, the image of the ideal king was altered by the trace of a sporting dimension, which was reflected in official inscriptions and representations. On the one hand, this new dimension is understandable in terms of the new identity of the king, the conqueror of the chaos of the Hyksos period, while on the other hand, however, it could be understood as a prophylactic measure to avoid an ignominious foreign rule on the whole. This sporting element being a special part of the king's dogma of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty was a reaction of this historical process of great range.

The favoured discipline of the king's sport was archery, where they took aim at copper ingots (used as targets). Generally, this was performed in the Bronze Age, where the ingots were transported by ship from the regions of copper mining to the great harbours of

---

14. WIEDEMANN, D., *Der Sinn des Laufes im Alten Ägypten*, Diss. Wien, 1975.

15. DECKER/HERB, *Bildatlas*, I, A 6-7.

16. DECKER/HERB, *Bildatlas*, I, A 8.

17. For the context of these representations and the race course see FRIEDMAN, F.D., "The Underground Relief Panels of King Djoser at the Step Pyramid Complex", *JARCE* 32 (1995) 1-42.

18. DECKER/HERB, *Bildatlas*, I, A; II, pl. I-LIII.

the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>19</sup> These ingots of copper,<sup>20</sup> which when alloyed with tin resulted in bronze, were a perfect material for the proper test of the king's accurateness and the penetrating power of his arrows. Experiments have shown that piercing these ingots by arrows is impossible,<sup>21</sup> but for kings other rules applied. In the inscriptions of the Egyptian kings of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty, it is exactly this performance which is reported. Further, within the texts, different performances of various kings are compared so that we can find a special conception of a record of sport.<sup>22</sup>

The most outstanding athlete on the Egyptian throne undoubtedly was Amenophis II (1428 – 1397 BC), son of Thutmosis III (1479 – 1425 BC), one of the mightiest kings of Egypt. The performances attributed to him break the reality even belonging to the sphere reserved only for kings. Here, gods come into play; they gave dominion to the king and in return took assurance in the duration of this race. This commitment (*religio*) of the kings' sporting performances to divine help is expressed in a concise manner in the Sphinx-stela of Amenophis II, the longest sporting text of Egyptian history.<sup>23</sup> Amun, the king of gods, is the god to whom pharaoh owes his rule. This preliminary idea is divided into many different aspects. Before the body of the text begins, Amenophis himself is compared with the gods:

---

19. YALCIN, Ü./PULAK, C./SLOTTA, R. (eds.), *Das Schiff von Uluburun. Welthandel vor 3000 Jahren. Katalog der Ausstellung des Deutschen Bergbau-Museums Bochum vom 15. Juli 2005 – 16. Juli 2006* (Veröffentlichungen aus dem Deutschen Bergbau-Museum Bochum 138), Bochum, 2005.

20. Found for the first time in a greater quantity in the wreck of Cape Gelidonya: BASS, G.F., *Cape Gelidonya. A Bronze Age Shipwreck* (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, N.S. 57, 8), Philadelphia, 1967.

21. DECKER, W./KLAUCK, J., "Königliche Bogenschießleistungen in der 18. ägyptischen Dynastie. Historische Dokumente und Aspekte für eine experimentelle Überprüfung", *Kölner Beiträge zur Sportwissenschaft. Jahrbuch der Deutschen Sporthochschule Köln* 3 (1977) 23-55.

22. DECKER, W., "The Record of the Ritual. The Athletic Records of Ancient Egypt", CARTER, J.M./KRÜGER, A. (eds.), *Ritual and Record. Sports Records and Quantification in Pre-Modern Societies* (Contributions to the Study of World History 17), New York/Westport, Connecticut/London, 1990, 21-30; DECKER, *Pharao und Sport*, 18-28. Measures were not only the own performances, but also these of the kingly predecessors.

23. LICHTHEIM, M., *Ancient Egyptian Literature. A Book of Reading*, I-III, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1973-1980, II, 39-43; ZIVIE, CH.M., *Giza au deuxième millénaire* (Bibliothèque d'étude LXX), Kairo, 1976, 269-284; KLUG, A., *Königliche Stelen in der Zeit von Ahmose bis Amenophis III* (Monumenta Aegyptiaca VIII), Turnhout, 2002, 223-234; BEYLAGÉ, P., *Aufbau der königlichen Stelentexte vom Beginn der 18. Dynastie bis zur Amarnazeit*, I-II (Ägypten und Altes Testament 54), Wiesbaden, 2002, 43-63, 592-600; DECKER, W., *Sport am Nil. Texte aus drei Jahrtausenden ägyptischer Geschichte*, Hildesheim, 2012, doc. 7, with older literature.

The strength of Month (god of war) is in his limbs, his power is like the power of the son of Nut (god Seth).<sup>24</sup>

And once again, Month, the god of war, is underlined as patron of the king's sporting capabilities, whereby this is explicitly represented earlier in the text:

He knew every work of Month.<sup>25</sup>

The details of his sporting excellence were reported as: unattainable as an expert of horses, as an archer and runner, he is an oarsman with the rudder of 10 m in its length and responsible for a ship with a crew of 200 men. Changing the scene: After having strung the bow with great expertise he is going to shoot:

Thereupon His Majesty appeared in his chariot like Month in his power. He took up his bow and grabbed four arrows at once. He rode northward shooting at them, like Month in his panoply, his arrows coming forth from their back-sides as he shot another post. Now it was a deed which had never been done before, nor heard by report: shooting at a target of copper an arrow which came forth from it and landed on the ground, except by the king powerful in splendor, whom [Amun] had strengthened, the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, c Akheperure, strong-armed like Month.<sup>26</sup>

The next part of the Sphinx-stela is devoted to the training of horses, on which the father Thutmosis III is depicted as very proud and full of joy when hearing of the unusual abilities of the crown prince Amenophis as a horse trainer.<sup>27</sup> The perfect handling of horses is a further qualification of a future ruler of Egypt. However, it states that at that time his youth was a hindrance to him in terms of fully knowing the art of war:

He is not yet of the age to know the work of Month.<sup>28</sup>

---

24. DECKER, *Sport am Nil*, doc. 7, l. 37-38. Here and in continuation are presented the lines of the German translation.

25. DECKER, *Sport am Nil*, doc. 7, l. 49-50.

26. DECKER, *Sport am Nil*, Doc. 7, l. 66-74; the English version is taken from DER MANUELIAN, P., *Studies in the Reign of Amenophis II* (Hildesheimer Ägyptologische Beiträge 26), Hildesheim, 1987, 203. For the king in chariot see PIETRI, R., "Le roi en char au Nouvel Empire", *Égypte, Afrique & Orient* 74 (2014) 13-22.

27. STARKE, F., *Ausbildung und Training von Streitwagenpferden. Eine hippologisch orientierte Interpretation des Kikkuli-Textes* (Studien zu den Boğazköy-Texten 41), Wiesbaden, 1995, 15-20.

28. DECKER, *Sport am Nil*, doc. 7, l. 83-84.

Furthermore, the Sphinx-stela depicts the king, giving orders to present the young expert of horses “especially beautiful horses from the stable of My Majesty” (l. 88), so that he may train them. The result of this was the satisfaction of Reshef and Astarte, two goddesses of the Ancient Orient, who were also patrons of horses in Ancient Egypt.<sup>29</sup>

The sportsmanship of Amenophis II being indebted to the gods and especially to Month was a prerequisite for him to take over reign of Egypt.

Apart from the titles of the king traditionally consisting of five connected elements to the gods, in the text of the Sphinx-stela the following gods are mentioned: Month (6 times), Amun (5 times), Atum (3 times), and all of the following once: Astarte, Geb, Horus, Maat, Re, Reshef and Seth. For comparison: the Egyptian text has 27 lines, while the German translation has 109.

### A COMPETITION BETWEEN GODS: HORUS AND SETH

Our reflections on the Sphinx-stela of Amenophis II, where a rigid absence with respect to competition was defected, should not be understood as a total abstention from sporting competition of the Egyptian Society.<sup>30</sup> The reservation is only valid for pharaoh due to ideological reasons. For the normal Egyptian, naturally participating in sporting competitions was not forbidden. The available sources show a lot of documents demonstrating wrestling,<sup>31</sup> stick-fencing,<sup>32</sup> boxing<sup>33</sup> and jousting,<sup>34</sup> as well as running<sup>35</sup> and rowing.<sup>36</sup> The archaic form of winning a bride through contest was also known to the Egyptians.<sup>37</sup> Whilst pharaoh was not directly involved among the participating athletes, he often was present

29. In the Egyptian pantheon there are no indigenous gods connected with horses. This gives a hint to the fact, that the horse and chariot were imported to Egypt from outside, in this case from the Ancient Orient. See also LECLANT, J., “Astarté à cheval d’après les représentations égyptiennes”, *Syria* 37 (1960) 1-67.

30. DECKER, W., “Das sogenannte Agonale und der altägyptische Sport”, GÖRG, M./PUSCH, E. e. a. (Hg.), *Festschrift Elmar Edel* 12. März 1979 (Ägypten und Altes Testament 1), Bamberg, 1979, 90-104.

31. WILSDORF, H., *Ringkampf im alten Ägypten* (Körperliche Erziehung und Sport. Beiträge zur Sportwissenschaft 3), Würzburg, 1939; DECKER/HERB, *Bildatlas*, I, 546-564 (43 examples).

32. DECKER/HERB, *Bildatlas*, I, 564-571 (12 examples); on a modern form of the ancient discipline see BOULAD, A.P., *Modern Tahtib. Egyptian Baton Martial and Festive Art*, Noisy-sur-École, 2014.

33. DECKER/HERB, *Bildatlas*, I, 572-573 (3 examples).

34. DECKER/HERB, *Bildatlas*, I, 573-600 (48 examples); HERB, M., *Der Wettkampf in den Marschen. Quellenkritische, naturkundliche und sporthistorische Untersuchungen zu einem altägyptischen Szenentyp* (Nikephoros Beihefte 5), Hildesheim, 2001.

35. Especially in mention to the long distance run of the soldiers of Taharqa: ALTENMÜLLER, H./MOUSSA, A.M., “Die Inschriften auf der Taharkastele von der Dahschurstraße”, *Studien zur altägyptischen Kultur* 9 (1981) 57-84; DECKER, *Sport am Nil*, doc. 16.

36. Particularly the boat-race in the time of Tutankhamun: DECKER, W./KURTH, D., “Eine Ruderregatta zur Zeit des Tutanchamun”, *Nikephoros* 12 (1999) 19-31; DECKER, *Sport am Nil*, doc.12.

37. DECKER, *Sport am Nil*, doc. 15.



as a spectator or in another form of passive relation with the events. A recently published relief from the mortuary temple of Sahure (5<sup>th</sup> dynasty, reign 2496 – 2483 BC) assembles contests in archery, stick-fencing, wrestling and a boat-race, organized for the festival activities in connection with the completion of the king's mortuary temple and pyramid.<sup>38</sup>

With knowledge of the mentioned sources of sporting contests, it is no surprise to find the idea of competition even in Egyptian mythology. Here, it acts as a decision criterion in the open question of the right to rule among the gods. In a story entitled 'The Conflict of Horus and Seth' written on papyrus in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC, the succession of the god Osiris is dealt with as the main subject.<sup>39</sup> Candidates within the story for becoming the new ruler are his and Isis's son Horus and the villain Seth, who is needed by the other gods because he is the only one who can expel the enemies from the barque of Re-Atum. The long ongoing quarrel continues throughout the story and at the end a contest in diving<sup>40</sup> is fixed to resolve the dispute. The winner was to be decided by the one who would not emerge before the time of three months. The goddess Isis, who intended to help her son Horus, unwillingly hurt him with a harpoon. A second ricochet of the harpoon went on to hit her brother Seth. It was his accusations which brought a halt to her use of the harpoon.

The story then talks of an agreed upon second contest. For which, Seth said:

We will construct some ships of stone and compete, we two. The office of the ruler should be given to the person who will be the victor against his rival.<sup>41</sup>

For the second contest, Seth is made to be a fool because he does indeed produce a ship of stone, whereas the clever Horus whitewashes a ship of wood to give it the appearance of a ship of stone. When Seth's ship sinks, he changes into a hippopotamus and overturns Horus's ship. But, the gods do not allow Horus to kill Seth in his shape as a hippopotamus.

The fact that the office of the ruler of gods is disputed in Egyptian mythology by a sporting competition plainly shows the principle of rivalry as elementary in Egyptian society.

---

38. DECKER, W./FÖRSTER, F., "Sahures trainierte Truppe. Sporthistorische Bemerkungen zu einem Relief aus der Pyramidenanlage des ägyptischen Königs Sahure (2496-2483 v. Chr.)", *Nikephoros* 24 (2011) 17-70.

39. DECKER, *Sport am Nil*, doc. 14.

40. For a general overview of diving in antiquity see MEHL, E., *Antike Schwimmkunst*, München, 1927, 111-114.

41. DECKER, *Sport am Nil*, doc. 14, l. 20-22.



**Fig. 1: Shooting stela of Amenophis II (1428-1397 BC), Luxor, Egyptian Museum, cf. DECKER/HERB, *Bildatlas*, E 4 (photo W. Decker).**



**Fig. 2: Training of horses by Ramses III (1183/82-1152/51 BC), Medinet Habu, mortuary temple of Ramses III, cf. DECKER/HERB, *Bildatlas*, I 99 (photo W. Decker)**



**Fig. 3: Wrestling, Beni Hasan, tomb 17 (Kheti), Middle Kingdom, cf. DECKER/HERB, *Bildatlas*, L 19 (photo W. Decker).**



**Fig. 4: Stick fencing, Medinet Habu, mortuary temple of Ramses III (1183/82-1152/51 BC), window of appearance, cf. DECKER/HERB, *Bildatlas*, M 9 (photo W. Decker).**