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# The Development of Boxing: The Ancient World (Western Asia and Egypt)

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### Abstract

The earliest written and visual records of boxing occur in Western Asia, from the Crimea to Mesopotamia. Particular styles of boxing can be identified from related artifacts, and various motives for the practice are revealed. We contest the translation of certain ancient terms as “wrestling”, suggesting that boxing is far more prevalent in Mesopotamian literature than earlier scholars have proposed. We offer tentative identification of previously overlooked works of visual art as “boxing” images.

## I Introduction

The ancient world displayed an astonishing variety of forms which are nonetheless recognizable as part of a single tradition of upright combat we denominate “boxing”. Polygenesis seems likely, and as we outline the historical record we draw attention to the probable *terminus ad quem* of many innovations, as well as—to the extent possible—their motivation and ramifications.

## 2 Western Asia

The earliest extant evidence for a sport in the boxing tradition comes from Western Asia. Archæologists can generally do little more than assign broadly estimated dates to the artifacts we will discuss. For this reason, these dates alone cannot confirm whether boxing images first appeared in the Caucasus or in Mesopotamia. However, it is relatively uncontroversial to claim that images of pugilistic behavior first appeared in Western Asia (including the Caucasus and the Crimea) in the third millennium before Christ.

At this stage, we identify depictions of boxing primarily by raised fists and often a squared stance, with fighters occasionally reflecting the “confronted animals” motif in a symmetrical pose. It is clear that strikes, upright stance, and so forth exist, and have likely have existed for a long time prior (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022a). As far as attire is concerned (and when detail is sufficient), we note that boxers from this early period are universally depicted with bare chests and wear a kind of kilt.<sup>1</sup> Other elements of the sport are as yet undocumented in the historic record.

### 2.1 The Caucasus and Crimea

The oldest known visual representation of a boxing match is a decorated flesh-hook produced in the north Caucasus sometime in the early Bronze Age. Participants in the Maykop culture raised massive kurgans to mark the burials of their esteemed dead and built dolmens (single-chambered megalithic structures) that functioned as abditories for their hoards. One such dolmen, located near Tsarskaya (modern Novosvobodnaya, Adyge Republic), contained a bronze flesh-hook adorned with two boxers. Radiocarbon dating of surrounding material suggests that the hook was created no later than 2900 BC, and perhaps as early as 3200 BC. Given the proposed date of its manufacture, the flesh-hook has been described as “the earliest sculptural image of a fist fight in the world” (Trifonov et al. 2021, p. 26).<sup>2</sup>

The boxers confront one another while standing on a representation of the down-turned horns of an animal, probably a bull.<sup>3</sup> An orthogonal projection, in the shape of a hook (also pointing downward) was used to retrieve flesh or hide from a boiling cauldron. Users of the instrument would have mounted it on a pole projecting into the hollow base of the hook (Figure 1).

The figures on the Tsarskaya flesh-hook are poorly preserved, but the essential features identifying them as pugilists are unmistakable (Figure 2). The fighters extend their arms towards one another with clenched fists.<sup>4</sup> The arms of one figure are bent with elbows raised to the level of the shoulders, just as a modern boxer delivers a proper hook to the head. The other combatant appears to throw a jab to the chin of his adversary while holding his right arm lower, bending it at the elbow and drawing it close to his chest. The similarity between the postures of these figures and various Mesopotamian depictions—not to mention modern fighters—is remarkable.

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<sup>1</sup>Admittedly, this style of dress is common in depictions of Mesopotamian men engaged in a variety of other activities, as well. However, the bare-chested character of boxing is a ubiquitous element of the activity in virtually all ancient contexts where visual information is available.

<sup>2</sup>“[C]амым ранним в мире скульптурным изображением кулачного поединка”

<sup>3</sup>This is arguably the first of many representations, literary and visual, that link bulls and pugilism.

<sup>4</sup>An early interpretation suggested that the figures represent adorants, with their hands raised in prayer.

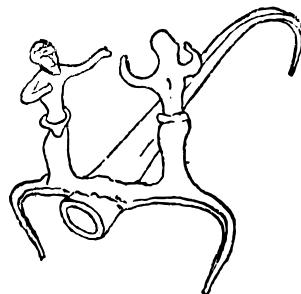


Figure 1: The Tsarskaya flesh-hook with figures of boxers positioned on a representation of down-turned bull horns.

Below the groin and buttocks, the legs of the flesh-hook boxers are rendered rather amorphously, so the fighters' stance cannot be evaluated precisely. The figures are entirely naked, but for a belt. They may bear some kind of protection over their genitals, but the artist has not indicated how this is secured, i.e., no part of the loincloth appears to stretch ventro-caudally. It has been argued that the artist intended for the boxers to appear ithyphallic (Trifonov 2015, p. 87). One of the figures wears a beard.

If the boxers on the Tsarskaya flesh-hook were rendered in relief, it has been argued, they would look much like depictions of two figures known as "fighting twins" found on several other objects discovered in the nearby Caucasus and as far away as the Crimea (Rezepkin 2000). Dated perhaps only a few hundred years after the manufacture of the Tsarskaya flesh-hook, these figures appear to have constituted a cultural theme celebrated by the early Bronze Age inhabitants of the region.<sup>5</sup>

The anthropomorphic Kazanki Stele (Figure 3),<sup>6</sup> discovered in the Crimea, depicts a pair of these "boxing twins". They assume a significantly different posture compared to fighting figures in Mesopotamian art. Their lead hands are in contact while their back arms are raised to shoulder level and retroflex, arcing down and forward. This gives the impression of a different kind of fight, perhaps one where the front arm is immobilized by grasping the opponent while only the back hand is free to do injury.

The "boxing twins" on the similar Akchokrak stele (Figure 4) are not so convincingly engaged in combat, were it not for explicit comparison with the Kazanki stele. On the Akchokrak stele, also discovered in the Crimea, the twins seem to bend slightly backwards at the hips with one arm high and another low, as if they are jointly reaching for some unseen object.

An exceptionally well-preserved dolmen on the northern coast of the Black Sea contains a primitive depiction of boxing, etched into the gigantic outward-facing foundation

<sup>5</sup>These Crimean and Caucasian boxers bring to mind the mythopoeic twins of much later Greek myth. The Dioscuri, associated strongly with boxing, are even connected to the Black Sea littoral, having sailed around it with Jason and the other Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece. Pollux/Polydeuces boxed the king of the Bebrycians in Bithynia, on the Turkish coast of the Black Sea.

<sup>6</sup>Anthropomorphic stele of this design (similar face, arms, belt, etc.) have been documented widely in the Black Sea region, as far south as Risqueh, near the Red Sea, as far east as Sahryeri, near the Caspian, and as far south as northern Iraq (Tell Billa), near the Tigris (Jeunesse 2015, Kodas 2015).



Figure 2: Boxers positioned on the Tsarskaya flesh-hook. Dated to 2900 BC at the latest, this artifact is perhaps the oldest sculptural representation of a boxing match.

stones (Trifonov 2015). Dated between 2480 and 2200 BC, the Džubga Dolmen stands on the Taman Peninsula, near Krasnodar, in Southern Russia. The appearance of a boxing petroglyph on the dolmen's face (Figure 6) suggests that its builders partook in the same culture as those who created the various boxing artifacts found just across the Kerch Strait, in the Crimea.

The motif of the “boxing twins” also appears on the Verkhorichchya Stele (Figure 5). The identification of the figures on these heavily eroded artifacts is admittedly tenuous, but a number of archaeologists, including A. A. Formozov and Viktor Trifonov agree that they are engaged in some form of unarmed ritual combat. The juxtaposition of the bodies in the Verkhorichchya stele is particularly suggestive of the close quarters at which boxers spar with one another. While the figures on the Džubga Dolmen are separated, their outstretched front arms effectively communicate a mutually-directed aggressive stance. In both sets of twins, the back arm extends backward and curls under. This could be a naive representation of the guard hand or perhaps a rough copy of the boxing iconography seen in votive plaques like the one found at Tell es-Senkereh, in modern Iraq (Figure 12).

These objects naturally lead us to wonder, did boxing on the northern coast of the Black Sea develop auturgically? On the basis of the shared elements in Mesopotamian and Caucasian-Crimean depictions, Trifonov et al. (2021) argue that boxing as a cultural practice emanated from Sumer to the headwaters of the Euphrates and beyond (see Section 2.2 for a full review of boxing in Mesopotamia). This of course privileges the narrative of cultural transmission from Mesopotamia to surrounding regions, which may not be accurate, particularly in the context of fist-fighting. As a ubiquitous practice among humans, there is little reason to presume that boxing was not already a native practice on the northern coast of the



Figure 3: “Boxing twins” on an anthropomorphic stele found at Kazanki, Crimea.



Figure 4: “Boxing twins” on an anthropomorphic stele found at Akchokrak, Crimea.

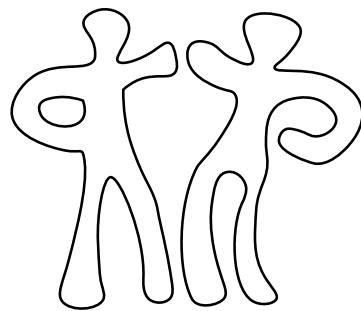


Figure 5: Detail of “boxing twins” on the Verkhorichchya Stele.

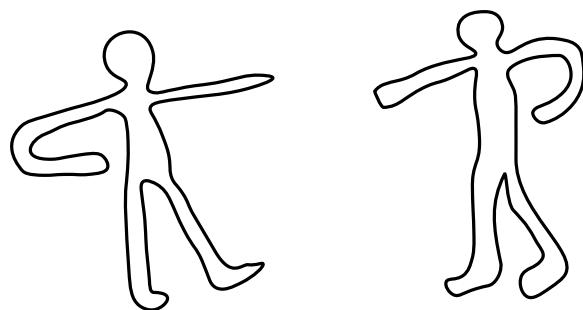


Figure 6: Detail of “boxing twins” on the Džubga Dolmen, in Krasnodarsk Krai, Russia.  
The Dolmen is dated 2480–2200 BC.

Black Sea when its inhabitants first came in contact with, e.g., the metallurgical techniques of Mesopotamia.

## 2.2 Mesopotamia

The first artifacts that indisputably depict boxers and boxing matches were produced in the city states of Sumer. As civilization grew up between the Tigris and Euphrates, writers and artists produced more and more evidence of boxing taking root and spreading. While the record is primarily visual, some literary evidence of boxing survives. In both cases, the evidence is contested and depends on our interpretation of sometimes ambiguous words and gestures.

According to one authority, boxing matches were organized in ancient Mesopotamia, though “we know little more than that they were part of festivals and took place in the area of the sanctuary [*Heiligtum*]” (Sallaberger 1983, p. 178). We cannot fully understand the inclusion of boxing iconography at temple sites without some delibration of the Mesopotamian temple cultus, which we provide in the present section. However, it is well beyond the scope of our work to give a full account of Mesopotamian religion.

### 2.2.1 Visual representations

Three gray limestone figurines, two housed at the Louvre and one at the University of Zürich (No. 1942; see Figure 7), may be the oldest representations of boxers in Mesopotamia. Crafted in the Late Uruk period, ca. 3300 BC, the figures are naked; they wear beards with no mustaches, shaved around the mouth; and they appear to wear caps. Critically for their interpretation as pugilists, their elbows are bent at the waist and their hands form fists (Trifonov et al. 2021, p. 35). Human figures from this period are typically depicted with their hands clasped, as in prayer. A bearded figure of similar date, though carved from alabaster with more sophisticated portrayal of the musculature, also clenches the fists at the level just below the chest (Iraq Museum, No. 61986). We admit that the designation of these figures as boxers is tenuous; they are more typically referred to as “priest-kings,” e.g., by Aruz (2003, pp. 25, 38).

The link between pugilism and these figurines is based primarily on their nudity and the fact that their hands are not clasped in prayer, like the ubiqurian orant figures of the (later) Early Dynastic period (Trifonov et al. 2021, p. 35). Aruz (2003, p. 38) argues that the figures’ nakedness “is probably connected with a ritual activity.” This is not out of line with the potential ritual function of boxing in Mesopotamian religion (see below). In coetaneous (Late Uruk) cylinder seals, nude figures are depicted carrying assorted objects, including agricultural produce, “toward an elaborate temple facade” (*ibid.*). Late Uruk sculpture in the round does not appear to admit the possibility of disengaging the figure’s extremities from the block of the body. Perhaps lacking the technical expertise to render extended arms and separated legs to effectively communicate the dynamism of boxers, the limestone figures merely incorporate the static iconography of Mesopotamian pugilists. Features like nudity, beards, well-developed pectorals, shoulders, and biceps may have been included for this purpose, though of course non-pugilists may bear the same features. The arms of all the relevant figures are bent at the elbow, with the fists clenched against the abdomen and the thumbs on top.

A limestone plaque from the Sin Temple at Khafajah, ca. 2500 BC (Iraq Museum, No.



Figure 7: A limestone figure from the Late Uruk Period (3300–3000 BC), kept at the University of Zürich (No. 1942). It has been claimed that the figure represents a boxer (Trifonov et al. 2021, p. 35).

9012), depicts boxers and a few surrounding figures including a referee or trainer (holding a staff) and a musician (far left) (Pelzel 1973, pp. 61–62). No definitive translation of the inscription that appears between the boxers has been offered, but one scholar tentatively claims that it means “son of...” (Aruz 2003, p. 73). The plaque has two other registers above the one shown in Figure 8, with a perforation in the center. These depict seated figures and their attendants, along with men and women who bear various vessels and esculents, including a goat. The “heavy belt and codpiece” worn by the boxers may be an early indication of groin protection (Aruz 2003, op. cit.) It has been conjectured that the plaque was donated by individuals who sponsored or participated in a festival like the one depicted, which was probably “a celebration associated with the fertility of the plant world” (*ibid.*). Thus, in one of the earliest depictions of boxing, we find it most likely connected to a sacred rite of spring. Sin, the divine patron of the temple, was a lunar deity of considerable importance in the Sumero-Akkadian pantheon. He was associated with bulls probably because of the visual resemblance between a pair of horns and the crescent moon (cf. Figure 21).

The perforation in the center of the plaque gives us a good indication of its purpose. It was probably used as decorative reinforcement for a door-locking mechanism in the temple (Hansen 1963, Zettler 1987). The plaque was fixed in the doorjamb and a peg, securely slotted into the doorjamb, went through the perforation in the plaque. This peg served as an anchor for a cord or hook attached to the door. Once fastened, the peg and adjoining portion of the cord or hook were covered with clay and impressed with a seal. To open the door, the seal would have to be broken, indicating that an unauthorized person had accessed the room on the other side. This suggests that the contents of the locked room were of considerable cultic importance. Anyone accessing that sacred space would first encounter a depiction of a temple ceremony that included boxing. This can leave little doubt as to the sacral nature of pugilism at this time in Khafajah, and perhaps of its particular importance to the cult of Sin, i.e., the moon.

But what, exactly, was the purpose of Mesopotamian rituals that included boxing? Deciphering the religion of ancient Mesopotamian cultures has proven much more difficult than one might first imagine. One prominent scholar has despaired that it simply cannot be accomplished. Due to the fragmentary nature of available evidence, spread across several millennia, languages, and cultures, Oppenheim argued: “[A] Mesopotamian religion should not be written” (1964, p. 172). Nevertheless, a broad view has since emerged that ritual duels were held during “temple holidays and funeral games” and that they were “closely associated with the cult of heroes and the development of ideas about death and immortality” (Trifonov et al. 2021, p. 35). Some neo-Sumerian texts, which refer to the provisioning of athletes, suggest that boxers may have been maintained by the state or the temple (Sjöberg 1985, p. 9). Elsewhere, it is suggested that “Sumerian boxing” constituted part of the “Hieros Gamos”, i.e., a sacred marriage between a god and goddess (Mathaf al-’Irāqī 1942, p. 66). A poem called “The Marriage of Martu” (discussed below) may “point to an old custom of arranging fistfights and trials of strength as a part of preparations for a wedding” (Sjöberg 1985, p. 8). Hierarchical boxing clearly took place in the temple courtyard. Visual representations of these holy fights were displayed in the innermost cellæ of the god’s dwelling, indicating that boxing was regarded as far more than an entertainment. Nevertheless, the precise cultic role of boxing in Mesopotamian religion may never be fully understood.

A terracotta plaque similar to the Sin plaque, also divided into registers, depicts boxers in the same location, i.e., at the bottom right (Mathaf al-’Irāqī 1942, p. 67, fig. 33). This item was



Figure 8: Two pieces of limestone plaque from the Early Dynastic IIIA period, spliced together. The piece on the left is from Level IX of the Sin Temple at Khafājah. The fragment on the right was held in the Iraq Museum (No. 9012) but its location after the looting of the museum in 2003 has not been verified (*Mathāf al-'Irāqī* 1942, p. 67, fig. 32). The piece on the left is the lower left of a larger plaque housed at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (No. A-12147).

found at the Temple of Nintu, a mother goddess, and presumably served the same purpose as the plaque found in the Temple of Sin. According to one critic, the “naturalistic” boxers depicted in both the Nintu and Sin plaques are “surprisingly coherent and believable in their movement... The slightly plump flesh is emphasized at the expense of the bony structure so that the figures takes on a somewhat bouncy, rubbery appearance” (Pelzel 1973, p. 69).

It has been suggested that the combatants depicted on the Nintu plaque are engaged in a new year’s celebration (*Akitu*) associated with the victory of Marduk over Tiamat (Offner 1962, pp. 34, 38). A ritual fight may have been only loosely associated with the mythic story itself, i.e., the fighters did not themselves represent the gods. Instead, the fighters may have contended merely to dramatize the ongoing struggle between the forces of order and chaos that lay at the heart of Mesopotamian religion (Lambert 1963).

Because the lower register of the Nintu plaque depicts two pairs of wrestlers at left, some commentators have argued that the combatants on the right (the ones we have been discussing) are also wrestlers, though they are depicted as having “just made contact” (Pelzel 1973, p. 68). While we appreciate the elegance of this interpretation (viz., only wrestlers are presented), we find it more compelling to interpret the figures in the lower right as boxers, based on their posture and the position of their arms, which appears to us more pugilistic in character. Moreover, the appearance of boxers in the lower right of both the Nintu and Sin plaques provides another kind of hermeneutic elegance. It may be that boxers were presented at this location in votive plaques to suit the artists’ iconographic sensibilities or to fulfill some ritual purpose associated with sacred geometry. One plaque may have even inspired the other. Indeed, the figures on the Nintu plaque are “so close as to be almost duplicates [of the Sin boxers], save for the fact that they beardless and at least one is also bald” (*ibid.*, p. 69).

A stela from Tell Aqar (near modern Badra, Iraq) preserves a depiction of combatants in an attitude highly similar to that of the figures on the Nintu and Sin plaques. Reportedly housed at the Iraq Museum (no number provided), the heads of the low-relief boxers are



Figure 9: A plaque found at the Temple of Nintu, depicting two boxers with their arms extended towards one another, at right (Frankfort 1943, p. 313, pl. 62–b).

missing. They are naked except for loincloths that resemble those worn by the boxers in the Sin plaque. The fighters' front feet cross slightly and their back hands meet at the level of the torso (Sjöberg 1985, p. 8). Like their heads, the raised front arms of the fighters cannot be distinguished. According to Sjöberg, who dates the Tell Aqar stela to around 2900 BC, this is the “earliest representation of wrestlers” (*ibid.*). As the posture is almost identical to the boxers on the Nintu and Sin plaques, we argue that the Tell Aqar figures are, in fact, pugilists.

A boxer may also be visible on a fragment of an alabaster votive plaque (Iraq Museum No. 42494) found at the Nintu Temple in Khafajah and dated to around 2600 BC (Pelzel 1973, pp. 71–71). A seated deity with a beard and long hair, wielding a mace and a scimitar in one hand and a frond in the other, looks on while a barely visible figure strides away from him.<sup>7</sup> The figure is arguably nude. It is relatively uncommon for figures to face away from divinities in these kinds of depictions (attendants typically fix their gaze on the deity), so it has been argued that the individual depicted is a boxer or wrestler facing off with his opponent while the god looks on, doubtless amused by the spectacle (*ibid.*, p. 71). The scene occurs in the lower register of the plaque, consistent with the placement of boxers in the Sin and (terracotta) Nintu artifacts discussed earlier.

An Old Babylonian (2000–1750 BC) terracotta plaque from Tell as-Senkereh (Larsa, an important city-state of Sumer) has been described as a scene depicting two boxers, with musical accompaniment, i.e., clappers and a drum (Figure 12).<sup>8</sup> One boxer throws a left while the other throws a right, crossing in the air without making contact. The other fist of each fighter is lowered to the waist with the elbow bent. The boxers may be wearing caps (*Kalot-*

<sup>7</sup>In the heavily eroded piece, the best indication of the figure's direction is the presence of a clearly defined foot that crosses behind the front-most foot of the seated divinity.

<sup>8</sup>The drum has been identified as the ‘ala’ instrument and its presence at boxing/wrestling events is noted throughout Sumero-Akkadian literature (Mirelman 2014).



Figure 10: Detail of a stela from Tell Aqar (Badra), Iraq depicts boxers on the right. The rightmost figure wears a loincloth like those of the Sin boxers (Figure 8) (Iraq Museum, no inventory number available).



Figure 11: The seated deity in this fragment of an alabaster votive plaque, found at the Nintu Temple at Khafājah and dated to around 2600 BC, may be watching a boxing match. Only the leftmost contestant is preserved, and only partially. While most of his features are heavily eroded, the boxer's foot can be seen between those of the god (Iraq Museum No. 4294).

*tenmütze*) and appear barefisted (Opificus 1961, p. 169). Their chests are uncovered and their loins are girt with kilts (British Museum, No. 91906). A fragmentary terracotta plaque from Kiš (Tell al-Uhaymir), arguably based on this one, is conserved in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford (Opificus 1961, p. 169).



Figure 12: Terracotta plaque of boxers and musicians from Larsa (Tell es-Senkereh), Iraq. Old Babylonian (2000–1750 BC). British Museum No. 91906.

A terracotta plaque from Eshnunna (Figure 13), probably from Tell Asmar, in the Diyala region of modern Iraq, portrays two bearded pugilists wearing beaded necklaces.<sup>9</sup> Their waists are wrapped in fringed kilts and they may be sporting caps (though curly hair is also suggested). Each projects one foot towards his opponent, with a slight bend in the knees. The opponents' feet cross. If this were a representation of a modern boxing match, we could say the figure on the right boxes southpaw, using his right hand as his lead, his jab, or his “one”. By contrast, the fighter on the right is in orthodox stance, putting his left hand to this use. Both fighters disobey the modern convention of raising their “two” hand to their face for protection. Instead, this arm is bent at a near ninety-degree angle at the waist, leaving the fist at the level of the abdomen. In the Eshnunna plaque, the pectoral muscles are emphasized, as are the calf muscles of the boxers’ lead legs. The Louvre tentatively dates the plaque to the first half of the second millennium BC. This is perhaps the most proleptic of Mesopotamian representations of boxing. Its features are to be found in depictions of boxers throughout the Mediterranean Basin for at least two millennia. Indeed, its influence is still palpable in the ubiquitous iconography of modern boxing posters and in the “face-off” that precedes well-publicized fights.

Another terracotta plaque (see Figure 14),<sup>10</sup> now held at the Louvre and similar to the Es-

<sup>9</sup>The other prominent example of ancient boxers wearing jewelry comes from the boxing boys of Akrotiri.

<sup>10</sup>An inventory number for this item has not been identified, despite an extensive search of the Louvre’s online



Figure 13: Terracotta plaque of boxers from Eshnunna (Tell Asmar?), located at the Louvre (No. AO-12447) and dated to around 2000 BC.



Figure 14: This terracotta plaque, which is kept at the Louvre, has an unfortunately non-specific provenance: “Babylonia, beginning of [the] second millennium” (Amiet 1980, p. 386, pl. 437; p. 450). It is similar to the Eshnunna plaque, also held at the Louvre (Figure 13).

hnunna artifact, is said to originate in “Babylonia”, ca. 2000 BC (Amiet 1980, p. 386, pl. 437; p. 450). The figures are most likely bearded. Because the fingers were not clearly delineated by the artist or have eroded, it is hard to rule out the possibility that the boxers are gloved. They certainly wear kilts similar to their counterparts in the Eshnunna plaque. The figure on the left may be wearing a necklace, but only a few beads are visible. The composition of the two boxer plaques at the Louvre is similar but by no means identical. We believe both portray telestic boxing matches between adult males that were widely known in Mesopotamia throughout the Bronze Age.

A relief depicting boxers with wristbands, identified by Iraq Museum no. 10039, has been observed (Poliakoff 1987, p. 172, fn. 3) but this item is perhaps now lost and, in any event, a photograph cannot be located.<sup>11</sup> Another Old Babylonian terracotta plaque from Girsu (Tell Telloh) is described by Parrot (1948, p. 286) as “une scène de pugilat.”<sup>12</sup> It appears to show a

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collections, accessed April 1, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Item 10039 could not be identified in the Iraq Museum database of the Oriental Institute of Chicago, [http://oiarchive.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/dbfiles/im\\_nos.htm](http://oiarchive.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/dbfiles/im_nos.htm), accessed May 22, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Just a few sentences later, Parrot (1948, p. 286) calls the same scene one of “lutte à main plate”. Unfortunately, the author’s ambivalence towards boxing and wrestling is consistent with that of many other interpreters of Mesopotamian art.

bearded man, naked to the waist, menacing a fallen opponent by gesturing with his arm.

Extant depictions of boxing in Mesopotamia have been dated no later than the early second millennium BC. No depictions of boxing have been discovered in Mesopotamian art of the Assyrian or neo-Babylonian periods. This may reasonably be interpreted as a decline in the cultic importance of boxing in the lands between the Tigris and Euphrates well before the end of the Bronze Age. By then, however, indications of boxing were appearing throughout the Mesopotamian periphery, viz., in Iran, the Levant, and Anatolia.

### 2.2.2 Literary representations: The oldest written word for ‘boxing’

The oldest written word for ‘boxing’ was impressed in clay tablets in Mesopotamia five thousand years ago. There are three Romanized transliterations for the word ‘boxing’ in Sumerian: gešpú, geš(b/p)a, and ḫešba; they can also mean ‘fist’, maybe in a *pars pro toto* sense. While discussing Sumeria, we will use the term GEŠPÚ (in small caps) to cover all three of the transliterations that appear in the Sumerological literature, except when greater specificity is required. In such instances the transliteration will appear in lower case.<sup>13</sup>

There are three cuneiform spellings of GEŠPÚ in Sumerian, combining a variety of Sumerian cuneiform signs (see Figure 15). The most common is a compound of šU ‘hand’ and BULÙG (also known as DIM<sub>4</sub>), which may mean ‘malt’, ‘approach’, ‘bow’, or ‘beg’. BULÙG may also be written as PAP.PAP; PAP may mean ‘prudence’, ‘protection’, ‘father’, ‘brother’, ‘man’, or ‘leader’.<sup>14</sup> The third attested form is šU.BULÙG plus the sign BA, a symbol which on its own may mean ‘alor’, a type of vessel, a type of tool, or a type of garment. In this case, Sumerologists render the spelling geš(b/p)a or ḫešba.

Owing to the polysemy of these signs, a great many compositional meanings present themselves as potential etymologies of Sumerian GEŠPÚ. The combination ‘hand’+‘protection’ is well-suited to the context of boxing, but ‘hand’+‘brother’, ‘approach’, ‘bow’, or ‘beg’ may all be appropriate, as well. As we will argue elsewhere, boxing itself is polysemous, so perhaps it is no wonder that the first word used to refer to the practice should also be vegeate with meaning.<sup>15</sup>

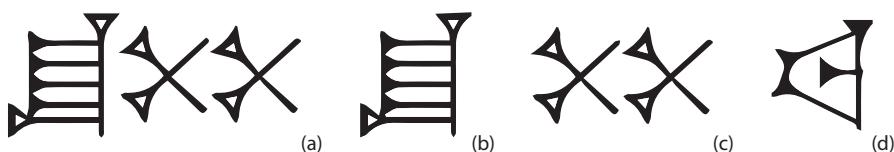


Figure 15: (a) Cuneiform signs for the most commonly occurring form of GEŠPÚ; and various components in this and other forms of the word: (b) šU; (c) BULÙG / DIM<sub>4</sub> / PAP.PAP; and (d) BA.

Sumerian GEŠPÚ appears to be equivalent to Akkadian (*b*)umāšu (Sjöberg et al. 2021).

<sup>13</sup>For consistency with the Hittitological literature, we will exclusively use the term GEŠPÚ (in small caps) in Section 2.5.

<sup>14</sup>It is not obvious why šU.BULÙG and šU.PAP.PAP are considered different forms in the *Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary*, since their cuneiform spellings are identical.

<sup>15</sup>Some may even wish to advance the proposition that Sumerian boxing had chrematitic origins, with the victor securing, e.g., a handful of malt for his pains.

Unfortunately, the meaning of the Akkadian equivalent is not well-established. In addition to ‘boxing’, it has been translated as ‘strength’, ‘wrestle’, ‘wrestling’, ‘wrestling match’ (*Ringkampf*), and ‘link in a chain’ (*maillon*). GEŠPÚ is found in a number of Akkadian dictionaries, where it is variously translated as ‘strength’, ‘wrestling’, ‘wrestling hook’,<sup>16</sup> ‘wrestler’, and ‘athlete’.<sup>17</sup> One scholar who argues *bumāšu* is related to wrestling, and to the wrestler’s belt in particular, concludes with a prevarication: “The language in which these proposals are advanced is consciously hypothetical. To do otherwise would, doubtless, be too daring” (Sasson 1974, p. 410). The transliterations gešpú and geš(p/b)a are together attested a total of seven times in the *Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary*.<sup>18</sup> All attestations are from the fourth and third millennia BC.

The transliteration ḫešba, written with the same cuneiform signs as the GEŠPÚ variants, occurs 58 times in the Sumerian corpus.<sup>19</sup> It is most frequently translated as ‘boxer’, but also as ‘fist’, ‘boxing’, and ‘fist fight’. While the cuneiform spellings associated with this transliteration are identical to those noted earlier for GEŠPÚ, three instances of ḫešba are preceded by the determiner LÚ, designating a male profession; this reinforces the translation ‘boxer’. The transliteration ḫešba is posited in cuneiform inscriptions from the Early Dynastic IIIa to the post-Old Babylonian periods, i.e., roughly from the third to the second millennium BC.

An untranslated tablet from Tell Jokha (Umma) dated to the Ur III period (2100–2000 BC) appears to refer to a ‘glorious boxer’ (transliterated KÙ GEŠBÁ<sup>BA</sup>)<sup>20</sup> followed by a mention of the deity Ningišzida,<sup>21</sup> sometimes associated with vegetation and the underworld, sometimes associated with victory.<sup>22</sup> The former quality seems to be referenced in this particular text, which may identify the god as a pugilist (Stone 2016).

Hill and Jacobsen (1990, p. 71, fn. 88) describe the courtyard of the Kititum temple, near modern-day Baghdad, by referring to the enactment, in the temple courtyard, of an activity called GEŠPÚ LIRÙM. LIRUM can be spelled ŠU.KAL in cuneiform and LIRÚM is spelled AŠ; both are glossed as ‘strength’.<sup>23</sup> The Akkadian equivalent is *(b)umāšu ú ubāru* and the phrase is frequently rendered merely as ‘wrestling’ though it clearly consists of two activities separated by the conjunction *ú* ‘and’. Hill and Jacobsen point out that the phrase regularly cooccurs with the Sumerian verb RA (Akkadian *mahāšu*) ‘hit’, implying that striking was a component of GEŠPÚ LIRUM.<sup>24</sup> Another authority has no trouble accepting that GEŠPÚ

<sup>16</sup> Sallaberger refers disparagingly to the “phantom” hook proposal, which he claims arises from a misinterpretation of the loincloth that dangles between the legs of the Khafajah pugilists (see Figure 8): ...mit einem zwischen den beiden hindurchführenden Schurz belkeidet sind (1983, p. 17, fn. 838).

<sup>17</sup> Citations include Labat and Malbran-Labat (1988, p. 165), Black et al. (1999, p. 421), and Borger (2004, p. 370).

<sup>18</sup> ‘gešba’, <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/epsd/e2071.html>, accessed June 5, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> [ḥešba]’ <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/epsd2/00029322>, accessed June 5, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> This appears to be yet another transliteration, not attested in the *Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary*. However, the inscription itself manifests one of the standard cuneiform spellings of GEŠPÚ discussed earlier, viz., ŠU.BULÙG.BA.

<sup>21</sup> This divinity is depicted, in some instances, with serpents emerging from his shoulders.

<sup>22</sup> Princeton Theological Seminary #1446, [https://cdli.ucla.edu/search/search\\_results.php?SearchMode=Text&ObjectID=P127212](https://cdli.ucla.edu/search/search_results.php?SearchMode=Text&ObjectID=P127212), accessed March 12, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/dcclt/signlists/00033186>; <http://oracc.iaas.upenn.edu/dcclt/nineveh/P397287/html>; accessed online August 6, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> In another translation, GEŠPÚ is rendered ‘tricks’, presumably some kind of tactic or set of tactics associated with wrestling. Hardly secure in this translation, however, the author points out that “[t]his practice of wrestling needs further investigation” (Vermaak 1993, p. 17, fn. 42).

means ‘boxing’, noting that gešba can be confidently rendered as “fist” in Sumerian sentences such as, “Before that, he hit me with his fist” (Sallaberger 1983, p. 178, fn. 838).

We now undertake a closer examination of a document that mentions GEŠPÚ. A thirteenth-century text (VAT 10610) found at Assur but believed to be an importation from Babylon, describes the proceedings when the cultic image of a god was brought into the Ešumeša temple at Nippur (Lambert 1960, pp. 118–120). In this context, “athletic young men” engage in GEŠPÚ “for [the deity]”, most likely Ninurta (*ibid.*, p. 120). Here, GEŠPÚ LIRUM is associated with the verb RA. Since it is a bilingual text, the equivalencies in Sumerian and Akkadian are easily established: Sumerian GEŠPÚ is Akkadian *úmaši* while LIRUM is *abari*. The relevant passage reads:

Drum and cymbal [...] sing out to you,  
Fat oxen and [fat] sheep are slaughtered for you as the king’s offering,  
Athletic young men fight for you with physique and might...  
When you enter Ešumeša, the house which stretches to heaven and the under-world... (*ibid.*).

This “Hymn to Ninurta” is undoubtedly related to the visual depictions discussed in the previous section, which frequently link music and sacrifice to pugilism, e.g., the limestone plaque excavated at The Sin Temple of Khafājah (Figure 8). Worshiped as the patron of both healing and warfare, Ninurta’s association with the bruising art seems appropriate.

A thousand years older than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, a short poem called “The Marriage of Martu” (Kramer 1990) offers a Bronze Age account of boxing. GEŠPÚ is mentioned in this work, first written down in the Old Babylonian period, between 1900 and 1600 BC. According to the narrative, an Amorite mountain,<sup>25</sup> storm, and/or warrior god named Martu seeks a wife. He goes to the city of Inab and fights in a competition. Martu comes to a place called the É GEŠPÚ, which likely refers to a location where boxing matches took place (lit. ‘the house of boxing’) or perhaps the school in which boxers trained (cf. É DUB.BA ‘the house of the tablet’ for scribes) (Rollinger 1994, p. 18–22). At the Temple of Inab, Martu engages in an activity that involves hitting his opponents, causing many to require bandages and others to die (Bernhardt and Kramer 1956–57). Given the action of hitting and outcomes including bleeding wounds and death,<sup>26</sup> GEŠPÚ in this context is not likely to mean ‘wrestling’.<sup>27</sup> Despite this, GEŠPÚ is typically translated as ‘wrestling’ in English versions of “The Marriage of Martu”.<sup>28</sup> We correct this error by following the suggestion of Hill and Jacobsen, noting the presence of the verb RA ‘hit’, not to mention the serious, even fatal, injuries that Martu inflicts on his opponents. Accordingly, we conclude that the Martu episode is best understood as a boxing tournament.

<sup>25</sup>“The most frequently attested epithet of the god Martu in all hymnic sources is his characterization as ‘the man/one of the hills/mountains’” (Klein 1997, p. 102).

<sup>26</sup>According to one translation, “In the main courtyard he [sc., Martu] lifts dead bodies” (Klein 1997, p. 107).

<sup>27</sup>Deaths in wrestling were not unknown in the (much later) Greco-Roman world but they were more rare than in boxing (Brophy and Brophy 1985). Indeed, unlike boxing, “[W]restling was never...meant to be a ‘victory or death’ contest” (*ibid.*, p. 175). The level of danger involved in wrestling depends on what tactics were allowed in the Mesopotamian variety. There is no positive evidence that it was more dangerous than the wrestling practiced by later ancient peoples.

<sup>28</sup>For example, the translation of Vanstiphout (1998) is used as the basis for the English version available at <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.7.1#>. Reflecting the ambiguity of the term, Mirelman (2014) translates GEŠPÚ as ‘boxing/wrestling’. Klein (1997, p. 107) calls it “an athletic wrestling or fighting contest.”

In “The Marriage of Martu”, the pugilistic encounters were held in honor of Numušda, a god of wild nature associated with storms. He was depicted as having a violent nature, which speaks to his association with boxing in the poem. As a prize for his victory in the boxing ring, Martu is offered silver and jewels but he chooses to marry the daughter of Numušda instead. The playing of drums is explicitly mentioned in the poem. In this respect, the scene is reminiscent of the boxing festivities depicted in the Tell as-Senkereh plaque (Figure 12).

One objection that could be raised to our interpretation of GEŠPÚ in “The Marriage of Martu” is that the fighters wear íB.LÁ, translated by Vanstiphout as ‘belt’ (1998). While belts are indeed associated with wrestling in a variety of ancient (and modern) cultures, there are many ancient examples of fighters girding themselves for boxing matches, as well, including graphic depictions of boxers on Thera and Crete (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b), along with textual evidence in the *Odyssey*, in which combatants don the ζώμα. Much has been made of the belts worn by the Boxing Boys of Akrotiri, which may be associated with a protective sea goddess (Parke 1987). In addition, the gloss of ‘belt’ versus ‘loincloth’ in the Martu narrative also seems uncertain. íB is glossed as ‘hips’ and LÁ or LAL can be glossed as ‘hang’, ‘hold’, ‘lift’, or ‘carry’, as well as ‘stretch’, ‘reach’ and ‘extend’. Elsewhere, íB-LAL is glossed tentatively as ‘underwear’ (Halloran 1996–2020). Thus, if one starts from the premise that GEŠPÚ refers to boxing in the “The Marriage of Martu”, then the ‘belt’ that is worn by the combatants need not supply counterevidence in favor of a wrestling scenario. As we have demonstrated, this ‘belt’ could just as easily refer to a boxing loin cloth (see Figure 8) or kilt, such as the garment depicted in the Tell as-Senkereh plaque (see Figure 12).

A hymn of Šulgi (C) refers to the king’s prowess as a sportsman. He proclaims himself “the strong man of GEŠPÚ and LIRÙM” and boasts, “In GEŠPÚ I was indeed the strong one” (Vermaak 1993, pp. 16–17). While Vermaak prefers the gloss ‘tricks’, he notes that the meaning of GEŠPÚ is “still open to discussion.” In this case, we again propose ‘boxing’ as the best alternative, following Hill and Jacobsen (1990), particularly because Šulgi himself seems to differentiate GEŠPÚ and LIRÙM as separate activities. Šulgi might be recognized as the first non-mythic, named boxer in history.

For mythic boxers, we turn to the Epic of Gilgameš and related Sumero-Akkadian literature. The violent encounter between Gilgameš and his rival-turned-best-friend Enkidu does not use the term GEŠPÚ or its Akkadian equivalent úmaši. The only two verbs used in the relevant passage are Akkadian *sabātu* ‘seize’ and *lādum* ‘crouch’. Seizing or clinching one’s opponent is a common technique in modern boxing and may have played an even more important part in the ancient Mesopotamian variety, as it does in modern Muay Thai. We will see the verb ‘crouch’ later, connected to Hittite boxers resting between rounds (Section 2.5).

Translations differ in ways that lead to different mental images of the bout. In one reading, Gilgameš and the wild man smash into the doorjamb; in another they demolish it (Akk. *abātu*) (George 2003, Gelb et al. 1964). Where terms are not specific, much is inferred from the consequences of the battling brothers’ activity: the walls quake. The passage sometimes translated to mean that the combatants fought like oxen (indicating to some the low center-of-gravity typical of wrestlers) might instead simply mean they fought like experts, including trained pugilists (George 2003, pp. 180–181, 191). When it comes to the fight, the text describes a rowdy altercation that takes place in the doorway of a wedding house—and not much more. The composer may have been more interested in the significance of the location (see our earlier discussion on the positioning of votive boxing plaques in temples) rather than the activity itself, which perhaps required no elaboration for a contemporary listener

familiar with Mesopotamian personal combat.

The fifth month of the Babylonian year, Abu, was sacred to Gilgameš.<sup>29</sup> During this month, a festival occurred in which “young men fight in their doorways in wrestling matches [GEŠPÚ LIRUM] and trials of strength.” A Late Babylonian menology (the Nippur Compendium) explains that Abu is the month of warfare, wrestling (*úmaši*), and trials of strength (*abari*) (George 2003, p. 126).<sup>30</sup> A Sumero-Akkadian menology known as Astrolabe B functioned as a kind of *Farmer’s Almanac* in ancient Mesopotamia, drawing relationships between the month and the stars on one hand and agricultural and social activities on the other. Significant portions of the text can be dated to between 1400 and 1000 BC. The bilingual entry for the month of Gilgameš has been translated: “For nine days the young men contest in wrestling and athletics in their city quarters” (Çağırğan 1984, pp. 405, 411).<sup>31</sup> Sumerian GEŠPÚ LIRUM is translated as Akkadian *úmáš úbari* in this text. It has been speculated that GEŠPÚ LIRUM was practiced by young men to commemorate the fight between Gilgameš and Enkidu.

In the Sumerian poem, the “Death of Bilgameš”, the ritual combat of Abu is described: “[T]he warriors, the young men and the onlookers shall make a semi-circle around a doorway,<sup>32</sup> and in front of it, wrestling matches [GEŠPÚ LIRUM] and trials of strength will occur.” The ritual fight takes place in front of funerary figurines and includes a torchlit ceremony commemorating the dead (including Gilgameš himself) (ibid., pp. 126–127).

The ritual combat also may be closely bound to a vaguely described Mesopotamian tradition involving single combat between the king and a challenger. The ritual could have toppled the king or confirmed his authority (George 2003, pp. 169–170). “[T]he king of the gods had to confirm his position by a display of physical supremacy at regular intervals” (ibid., p. 170). During the Akītu festival at Babylon, the earthly representative of Marduk was slapped in the face before being reinstalled as king. Perhaps these rituals, linked to the epic conflict between Gilgameš and Enkidu, were mythopoeic vestiges of a long-discontinued rite of kingship. Indeed, there is reason to believe that such a tradition informed the composer of the Epic of Gilgameš. Before their encounter, Enkidu is proclaimed by the people as a champion, counterpart, or rival (Akk. *mehrūm*) to the king and they opine on how well the two are matched physically (ibid., p. 190). The people seem to goad the two heroes to fight, surrounded by a festival atmosphere at Uruk.

Finally, we encounter the earliest reports of prizefighting in Sumerian literature. Besides “The Marriage of Martu”, where the victor is offered a monetary prize before requesting a wife instead, Sallaberger mentions two other instances of chrematitic boxing; these may or may not be associated with the Sumerian temple cultus (1983, p. 16, fn. 53). In one, the boxer (the son of a musician named Alla) receives a silver ring worth ten shekels for mixing it up with his opponent. In the other, a second boxer identified by his patronymic receives an unidentified gift for ‘beating up’ (Sum. TAG.TAG) his adversary. The verbs are not specific enough to indicate the outcomes of the matches precisely, but since only one boxer is paid

<sup>29</sup>The Gregorian equivalent of this month comprises the end of July and the beginning of August.

<sup>30</sup>The latter term may be the Akkadian cognate of the verb *abāq* used to describe the conflict between Jacob and a divine being in Genesis (see Section 2.4).

<sup>31</sup>Astrolabe B indicates that the month sacred to Gilgamesh was also associated with the star Sirius and the warrior god Ninurta. During this month, the Annunaki or fate deities were celebrated with the lighting of torches, which evidently provoked a rivalry between Girra, the god of fire and Šamaš, the solar god.

<sup>32</sup>Literally, “form a doorway like a crescent”.

and his activity is described in positive terms, we can only imagine that the victor was the one who took home the prize.

It appears that boxing was not commonly represented in Assyrian art,<sup>33</sup> though a few texts found at Assur refer to organized athletic events including wrestling and, arguably, boxing (Sjöberg 1985). Some of these texts may have been imported from other locations and were perhaps substantially older than Assyrian culture itself. One text is associated with Gilgamesh celebrations (Reiner and Pingree 1981, p. 81, lines 13–15). An incantation text from the first millennium BC admonishes the sorcerer to “place (two) figurines of bitumen (representing) two grappling wrestlers.” This translation, provided by Sjöberg, is based on the transliteration of the original cuneiform text (Nies and Keiser 1920, No. 22, lines 172–173). Nies and Keiser, who unfortunately do not provide their own translation of the two relevant, fragmentary lines, descry the critical Akkadian word *úmaši* for what is rendered by Sjöberg as ‘grappling wrestlers’. As we note elsewhere, this term is equivalent to GEŠPÚ in Sumero-Akkadian bilingual texts and thus the incantation may in fact refer to pugilists made of bitumen. Another text uncovered at Assur is published in Lambert (1960, p. 116), *ut supra*. Finally, Sjöberg refers to a text from Tell Kuyunjik (Nineveh) that mentions athletes performing at a festival of a goddess. Unfortunately, no citation was provided and so we have been unable to verify the Akkadian term(s) used to describe these hierurgical athletes. We suspect a word like *úmaši* appears in this as-yet unidentified text.

Thus, we see that a variety of textual sources in ancient Mesopotamia refer to boxing, though there has been a tendency to render the term GEŠPÚ and its equivalents as ‘wrestling’ in some English<sup>34</sup> translations of Sumerian and Akkadian literature. Given the tentative nature of most of these translations, we have argued for the translation ‘boxing’ as a more convincing alternative in many of them. This, in turn, serves as a complement to the intriguing (and generally incontestable) graphic evidence of Mesopotamian fist fighting.

### 2.3 Iran

We are aware of only one ancient object suggestive of boxing in the region that is today circumscribed by the borders of Iran. The golden bowl of Hasanlu (Tehran Museum No. 10712) was discovered by archaeologists working in the extreme northwest, near the border with Iraq (Porada 1959, Winter 1989). The culture that made the bowl has not yet been identified but it was clearly influenced by the neighboring Assyrians, Urartians, and Hurrians. The settlement at Hasanlu was destroyed by fire around 800 BC (most likely by fighters from Urartu) and the bowl was discovered among the remains of individuals who may have been looting or attempting to preserve it (Danti 2014). Because of the unique circumstances of its deposition, it is difficult to date the production of the bowl, which was perhaps already three hundred years old at the time of Hasanlu’s cataclysmic demise.

The figures of interest on the Hasanlu bowl include what appear to be a hero and a mountain deity, engaged in fistic combat. The hero wears “ribbed shields which seem to have the function of boxing gloves” (Porada 1959, p. 20). He is dressed in a kilt, with bare chest, in the manner of Mesopotamian fighters. His hair is held back in a fillet, perhaps ad-

<sup>33</sup>One potential counterexample is a cylinder seal used by Assyrian merchants at Kaneš, in Anatolia, discussed in Section 2.5. In addition, the provenance of many of the cylinder seals discussed in Section 2.4 is unknown; based on their iconography, some of the seals could be of Assyrian origin.

<sup>34</sup>As we have remarked elsewhere, German scholars seem more open to regarding this activity as a fistfight.

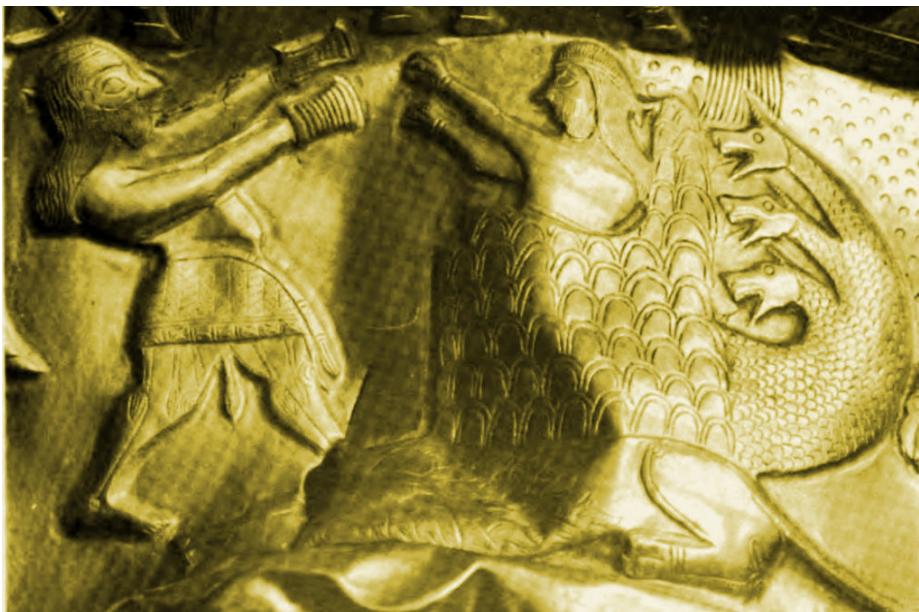


Figure 16: Detail of repoussé boxers on the golden bowl of Hasanlu (Tehran Museum No. 10712). Deposited around 800 BC, there is no consensus as to its age. The figure on the left represents a hero battling a mountain deity, right. Note the corded boxing gloves covering the fists of the heroic figure.

dressing the same problem experienced by criniferous boxers down to the present age, viz., hair occluding one's vision. The hero engages with a figure emerging from a depiction of a mountain, identified by a great number of arches (as in Hittite art). Similarly bare-chested, the mountain deity's hands look like the paws of an animal. Both hands are stretched out and the torso and head lean backward. The same is true of the heroic figure, who bends dramatically retrograde at the waist.

With both arms outstretched and with the body leaning backward, we notice at once that this is a unique depiction of a boxing match in the ancient world. It suggests a variety of boxing where the head was the primary target, and so had to be held as far away from one's adversary as possible.<sup>35</sup> As for the boxing gloves, if the execution of the bowl can be placed at the beginnings of Iron Age Hasanlu, then the repoussé boxer wears one of the early depictions of boxing gloves in ancient art. This artifact is, however, most likely antedated by Minoan depictions of boxing (which also feature gloves) produced much earlier in the second millennium BC. We believe the Hasanlu boxing gloves represent an older version of the Greek *ἰμάντες* or boxing thongs. Like the Greek version, the Hasanlu gloves may be composed of leather strips, or perhaps they were made of rope (a proposed etymon of *ἰμάς*).

The duel between a man and a mountain deity is particularly interesting, given the strong association between boxing and mountain worship among the Hittites. The Hittites of course predated the ill-starred Iron Age residents of Hasanlu by hundreds of years, but successors of the Bronze Age Anatolian kingdom may have influenced the myths of Hasanlu, most likely by way of the Hurrians. Indeed, a connection has been posited between Hurrian mythology and the boxers on the Hasanlu gold bowl (Porada 1959). The heroic figure may represent the weather god Tešub, come to fight his archrival (and by some accounts, his brother), the rock monster Ulikummi (Güterbock 1951; 1952). This story was found, written in Hurrian, among the trove of Hittite documents discovered in central Anatolia. We turn to Hittite boxing in Section 2.5.

There are only two literary references to boxing in classical Iran; both are indirect and both come from Greek commentators. Strabo indicated that Parthian boys were trained in the athletic competitions of the pentathlon, which was known to include javelin-throwing or boxing—but not both (*Strab.* XV.iii 18). Thucydides suggested that boxers from this region donned belts: “To this day among some foreign peoples, especially in Asia, when prizes for boxing and wrestling are offered, belts are worn by the combatants” (*Thuc.* I.vi, 5, trans. Livingstone 1951). Writing during the fifth century BC, Thucydides may have been referring to the Achæmenians, but the statement is of course far too general to be conclusive. One scholar notes, “[T]here is little indication that boxing was of any great significance as a recreational activity in Iran” (Spier 1975, p. 155).

## 2.4 The Levant

The account of Jacob's ‘wrestling’ match with ’El, YHWH, or one of his divine emissaries (Genesis 32:22–32) uses the Hebrew verb *abaq*, meaning ‘to become dusty’ to describe the struggle, which lasted until dawn. It is derived from the triliteral root *abq*, meaning ‘dust’. The verb occurs only twice in the Hebrew Bible, both times in the story of Jacob's encounter

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<sup>35</sup>We note, however, that this is a losing proposition for any boxer who wants to land a punch and defend himself at the same time. The awkward position depicted on the Hasanlu bowl puts the boxer at too great a distance from his opponent to strike with much force.

with divinity at Peniel. While generations of scholars have concluded that Genesis 32 describes a wrestling bout between Jacob and the divine being, the text itself is ambiguous, merely suggesting that the combatants got themselves dirty. It is clear from the context that this was an epic battle (the prolonged length of the match recalls the encounter between Gilgameš and Enkidu), but there is no way of knowing from the words of the text whether it was constituted of orthograde or pronograde combat (both of which are well attested in the ancient Near East). When examined closely, *abaq* is as difficult to translate as Sumerian GEŠPÚ or Akkadian *humāšu*, though it is confidently and consistently rendered in English translation as ‘wrestle’ (KJV, NAS, INT). We are hesitant to suggest that YHWH and Jacob boxed at the stream Jabbok, but there is nothing in the text that rules it out—as long as they got dirty in the process. The two combatants most likely engaged in a sort of rough-and-tumble that involved strikes. We surmise as much because the struggle ended with a blow: the divine being ‘touched’ the socket of Jacob’s hip. In Job 1:19, the same verb is rendered ‘smite’ (KJV).

Hip displacement, whereby the ball head of the femur becomes removed from its seat in the acetabulum (the ‘socket’), typically occurs due to traumatic injury. In the modern world, it is most frequently observed as a result of motor vehicle collisions, where the patient’s thigh strikes the dashboard of the car, “sending a posteriorly directed force to the joint” (Dawson-Amoah et al. 2018, p. 242). According to one review, “among elite wrestlers, the hip is rarely even noted as a source of problems” (Byrd et al. 2017, p. 334). In the ancient world, hip displacement may have occurred most often when individuals fell or were struck in the leg by animals or heavy objects. While it is plausible that Jacob suffered this injury in the course of a wrestling encounter, the text may well indicate that the injury came about due to contact between Jacob’s hip and the divinity’s fist.

The wrestling motif is perhaps more unambiguously suggested in the next passage: the divine being asks Jacob to “let me go”—a verb rendered in I Kings and elsewhere in Genesis more generically as “send away” (KJV). While one may reasonably wonder what—besides a particularly effective wrestling hold—could have dissuaded a deity from taking his leave at his own pleasure, there is still no explicit verb of grasping or grappling found anywhere in the text. Given the ancient Near Eastern traditions of boxing we discuss in this article, as well as the fact that Jacob’s hip was traumatically ‘smitten’ by the divinity’s fist during the bout, it seems entirely plausible that Jacob’s struggle with the divine being involved some form of boxing, most likely in addition to wrestling. Thus, the account in Genesis 32 may have its closest Near Eastern analogs in the “Marriage of Martu” and the Epic of Gilgameš.

Aside from our admittedly tenuous identification of a boxing battle in the Hebrew Bible, there is substantial evidence of pugilism in the glyptic art of the ancient Levant. Cylinder seals were used widely as a security device throughout Mesopotamia and its neighboring regions during the Bronze and Iron Ages. Rolled across a clay tablet, the carved cylinder left the impression of a scene associated with the authority who had made the impression, thus authenticating the authorship of the tablet for its intended reader. While the cylinder seals depict a variety of scenes, the combat or contest scene is one of the most common (Thompson 2013, p. 11). We argue that a good number of these combat scenes depict ancient forms of boxing.

For example, the seal illustrated in Figure 17 dates from sometime between 1850 and 1620 BC and was collected in Syria, though no more specific provenance is available (Teissier 1984, pp. 87–88, 326). The figures on the left are engaged in boxing or wrestling while the figures on the right confront one another with knives in hand. Thompson argues that the



Figure 17: Impression of a Syrian cylinder seal (a more precise provenance is not available). Boxers appear on the left, knife fighters on the right. One of the boxers wears a top knot, a fashion frequently attested in much later Roman depictions of boxers and pankratiasts. 1850–1620 BC. Marcopoli Collection, Summa Galleries (?), Seal No. 547 (Teissier 1984).

figures on the left are grasping each other's wrists, suggestive of wrestling. However, the open character of the hands does not convey to us the same interpretation. We believe it is just as likely that they are boxing. The fighters wear a split skirt or paneled loincloth and appear to be belted. Their arms furthest from the viewer cross in the fashion well attested from the earliest depictions of boxing found in lower Mesopotamia (see Section 2.2). The ‘ball-staff’ that appears in the field between the two pairs of fighters is likely a fertility symbol associated with the goddess Ištar (Thompson 2013, p. 21), strongly suggesting that pugilism in this context related to sexual success. The hand (which appears to the far left and right in Figure 17, is thought to represent the tradition of severing a prisoner’s hands, perhaps associated with Ištar’s dual role as a war deity (*ibid.*). One remarkable aspect of this glyptic is the topknot worn by the leftmost boxer. This hairstyle is observed in depictions of boxers well into late Antiquity, most likely because it served the purpose of keeping the hair out of the face and away from the grasp of an adversary.

Another seal (British Museum No. 130651) was excavated at Level VII (Middle Bronze Age) of the Alalakh Palace in far southern Turkey (Figure 18). In the Middle Bronze Age, Alalakh passed between the hands of Mari and Yamhad. It was destroyed by the Hittite king Hattušili I at the end of that period. The seal is made of black chlorite and, we argue, depicts a pair of boxers in combat with each other, urged on by a third figure, standing to their right.

The Alalakh boxers “seem to be aiming, or even grasping, at each other’s faces” (Collon 2000, p. 287). Collon sees in this a similarity to the boys in the Akrotiri Boxer Fresco; we will address Minoan boxing, and this fresco in particular, extensively in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2022b). Collon notes further: “There is no evidence, however, for the single boxing glove



Figure 18: Impression of a chlorite cylinder seal (British Museum No. 130651) depicting boxers and animal-fighting. Middle Bronze Age, 2100–1500 BC.

that the [Akrotiri] boxers wear.” We disagree. Based on the differential size of the boxers’ back hands (also, the size of these hands compared to the hands of the figure to their right, including one which is clearly clenched), we conclude the figures are each wearing only one boxing glove. Moreover, the glyptic represents an example of enantiomorphic boxing, given that the enlarged striking hands are on the arms of the opposed figures furthest from the viewer. Collon notes that the seal is “extremely coarsely engraved” (p. 287). For this reason, in part, we disagree with Thompson’s (2013) claim that the fighters hold daggers in the hands closest to the viewer (p. 21). We also agree with Collon in rejecting the possibility that the Alalakh figures are wrestlers. Besides the fact that the contestants aim for each other’s faces, as Collon puts it, British Museum curators note that their attitude is dissimilar to that of the wrestlers adorning the walls of the Chapel of Khety at Beni Hasan (XIth Dynasty Egypt) and is in fact more similar to the posture of the boxing boys of Akrotiri.<sup>36</sup>

A significant figure stands to the right of the boxers in the Alalakh seal. He appears to wear a headdress and a calf-length skirt (the boxer’s kilts barely reach their upper thigh). The right hand of this figure is clenched and the left hand is open. His posture seems to indicate that he is encouraging the fighters and perhaps even mimicking their blows with his clenched fist. Looking at this glyptic figure, one naturally recalls a spectator at a modern boxing match, muscles tensed and hands balled into fists in eager anticipation of a desired outcome in the ring. A third figure in pugilistic scenes would later become much more common, especially in Greek vase painting. In these cases, the third figure usually wields an implement suggesting his authority as a referee or trainer. In the Alalakh seal, the role of this figure is more ambiguous but his presence recalls both the figure in the limestone plaque from the Sin Temple of Khafajah (Figure 8) and foreshadows the ubiquitous “third man in the ring” found in many later depictions.

In the seal’s terminal we observe a quadruped, perhaps a dog, sitting on its haunches and

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<sup>36</sup>[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W\\_1939-0613-119](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1939-0613-119)

turning its head towards a lion jumping on its back. The appearance of these animals combatant are perhaps intended to parallel the boxers in the scene. Given the close relationship between animal fighting (cynomachy, alectryomachy, and bear-baiting, in particular) and pugilism in the early modern era, the animals may be tautological, i.e., depictions of theriomachy that actually accompanied boxing matches at Alalakh.<sup>37</sup> The two birds flying above the fighting animals may be representations of a Syrian goddess (Thompson 2013, p. 21). According to Thompson, “[T]his seal may portray a type of ritual combat involving two warriors/heroes in the presence of an official and the gods” (p. 21).

Boxing matches are represented in two or three cylinder seals found at Ugarit (Ras Shamra, northern Syria), dated to the early second millennium BC (Schaeffer-Forrer 1983, pp. 50, 55–56). In the older of the two (Figure 19), one of the boxers is occluded by damage to the cylinder, but his arm is visible, crossing that of his adversary, in the confrontation pose typical of Mesopotamian boxers of roughly the same era (see Figures 12, 13, 14).<sup>38</sup> The boxer wears a horizontally-striated loincloth or kilt and a double-necklace. The boxers appear to wear bracelets on one or both wrists. An entatic column or “portable altar” (*ibid.*, p. 55) with flat extremities stands between the boxers at about the height of the knees. A third figure, probably the referee, views the action, dressed in an embroidered robe draped from one shoulder. He appears to make a formal ring gesture with his right hand. A feline and a bird are partially visible behind him.



Figure 19: Impression of a fragmented Ugaritic hematite cylinder seal showing a boxer crossing arms with another (partially visible) boxer and separated by an altar. An official stands nearby, making a ring gesture (National Museum of Damascus). The object is dated to the eighteenth century BC.

In a cylinder of perhaps slightly less antiquity (Figure 20), the boxers have not yet begun their duel. The fingers of the hands facing one another, pointing upward, are disproportionately elongated in the same manner observed in much later Etruscan tomb paintings (e.g., in

<sup>37</sup>We will remark on a similar juxtaposition of human and animal fighting among the Hittites (Section 2.5).

<sup>38</sup>A third Ugaritic cylinder seal, in stone rather than hematite, is mentioned by Schaeffer-Forrer (1983, p. 50) as including athletes, presumably boxers, making the same gesture. The item is identified as RS 25.180 but no photograph of the seal has been located.

the Tomba della Scimmia at Chiusi, early fifth century BC). Their other arms are lowered behind their backs, not bent at the elbow, with their hands open. Between the boxers is a column or altar; above it and between the fighters' raised hands glows an eight-pointed star. The fighters are bare-headed and they wear necklaces and short striated loincloths or kilts. Identified as a referee by Schaeffer-Forrer (1983, p. 56), the individual to the right is nonetheless dressed in the same fashion as the boxers (cf. Figure 19, where the third party is more richly robed). He is separated from the fighters by another, smaller column or altar, and is accompanied by the image of a whale (*un cétacé* ibid.) floating over his back shoulder. If we extend Thompson's (2014) interpretation of the Alalakh cylinder seal, we might argue that the whale represents a deity in whose honor the combatants fight each other.



Figure 20: Impression of a Ugaritic hematite cylinder seal showing two boxers saluting one another before the initiation of combat; an official or a third boxer stands nearby (National Museum of Aleppo). The object is dated between 1750 and 1650 BC.

The cylinder seal impression shown in Figure 20 is similar in many ways to another one presented by Thompson (2013, p. 8, fig. 1.1). While no provenance is given, the seal is dated to between 1850 and 1720 BC and is almost certainly Syrian in origin. It features two figures in a pose similar to the one assumed by the boxers in the Ugaritic hematite cylinder seal *ut supra*: one hand is raised in salute and the other is lowered to a neutral (non-defensive) position. The third figure in the scene holds a dagger in each hand. The dagger in his left hand points downward to an ankh symbol, suggesting Egyptian influence. In the terminal, a griffin rampant soars above a guilloche; below the guilloche, an ibex couchant. Both animals face the fighters. In the “prize” position between the fighters, a table is laden with objects; this table is a common feature of boxing depictions well into late antiquity, including in a mosaic at the Villa Selene on the Libyan coast. A seven- or eight-pointed star blazes above the fighters; along with the animals, this is likely a representation of a divinity whose numinous presence sacralizes the combat (Thompson 2013).

A Hematite cylinder seal, probably from Cyprus, depicts bull-headed demons or men wearing bull masks engaging in a boxing match (British Museum No. 89320). The position between the fighters, reserved for a prize in later Greek depictions, is occupied by the head of a stag (Figure 21). A cross-disc and crescent hover above and between them. We speculate that the men wearing bull masks represent the close connection between animal fighting and boxing best established by the practice of *tarpa* among the Hittites.



Figure 21: Detail of boanthropic pugilists from an impression of a hematite cylinder seal that was probably found on Cyprus (British Museum No. 89320). The object is undated.

## 2.5 Anatolia

Remarkably, our acquaintance with boxing in Bronze Age Anatolia comes to us almost exclusively by way of textual, not visual, sources. These can be dated securely to no later than the thirteenth century BC (Carter 1988, p. 185). By comparison, it took the Greeks 500 more years to write about boxing (if we discount speculation about boxing-related matter on the Phaistos disk).

The Hittites, an Indo-European group who inhabited central Anatolia throughout most of the second millennium BC, recorded many elements of their unique cultus on clay tablets. These were buried in the ruins of their capital, Ḫattuša (modern Boğazköy), from the fall of the Hittite empire until the first decade of the twentieth century. Inscribed in an adapted version of Old Assyrian cuneiform, the writing on the tablets borrows heavily from the Sumerian and Akkadian languages, among others. Accordingly, we once more encounter the Sumerogram GEŠPÚ, now scattered across the tablets excavated at Ḫattuša.<sup>39</sup>

Unlike the Sumerian and Akkadian forms mentioned earlier, GEŠPÚ is spelled uniformly in Hittite texts. It is rendered as šU.PAP.PAP, with the innovation of shifting the second PAP to the left and shortening its strokes, so that it partially overlaps with the first (see Figure 22). Early on, German scholars translated the Sumerogram GEŠPÚ as *Faust* ‘fist’, *Faustschlag* ‘punch’, and *Offensivkraft* ‘offensive power’ in Hittite texts (Sommer 1932, p. 181–183). The term is now generally rendered as ‘boxing’ in English translations of Hittite literature.

In five different Hittite texts,<sup>40</sup> GEŠPÚ appears seven times in contexts where it can be translated confidently as ‘boxing’.<sup>41</sup> In several additional cases, it has been argued that GEŠPÚ

<sup>39</sup>The hieroglyphic form of Luwian, a close linguistic relative of Hittite, may have had a sign for ‘boxing’, as well. PUGNUS (a fist, thumb up, palm-side forward, pointing rightward, with almost half the forearm showing and wearing a bracelet) represents a verb with a highly uncertain meaning (Hawkins 1975, p. 128). It has been claimed that PUGNUS means ‘to fight’ (Hawkins 1995, p. 119). Other contend that it can mean ‘to hold’, ‘to serve’, ‘to conquer’, and ‘to live’ (Goedegebuure 2012, p.177).

<sup>40</sup>CTH 526.14, 526.31, 526.34, 528.106, 648; GEŠPÚ appears three times in CTH 526.14.

<sup>41</sup>At least one Hittitologist prefers the translation ‘wrestling’, but we find this unacceptable, given the secure etymology of the Hittite word *bulbuliya* ‘wrestling’ (a reduplicated form of the verb ‘wind’ or ‘twist’), with which



Figure 22: The cuneiform sign for GEŠPÚ ‘boxing’ as it appears in Hittite texts. As in Sumerian, the sign is a composite of ŠU+PAP.PAP. However, the two PAP signs overlap, with the strokes of the second PAP shortened (cf. Figure 15a).

denotes a representation of a fist, a work of art which, in turn, may have been associated with boxing (Güterbock and Kendall 1995).<sup>42</sup> As with a number of other Sumerograms that appear in Hittite texts, we do not know how Hittite speakers pronounced GEŠPÚ. Unfortunately, this means we cannot infer from Hittite anything about the roots of the word ‘boxing’ in other Indo-European languages.

Around the thirteenth century BC, the Hittite royal house began to gather information about autochthonous cults within its realm. This resulted in so-called “cult inventories” describing the religious festivals observed in provincial cities across the empire. According to one authority, “Hittite religious festivals were characterized by a variety of types of activity, including processions, sacrifices, offerings, prayers, purification ceremonies, ritual meals, and occasionally, athletic contests or tests of physical prowess” (Carter 1988, p. 185). Another scholar writes that Hittite festivals “constitute those rituals where the symbolic power of action is most strongly perceived” (Cammarosano 2018, p. 103). The cult inventories contain the majority of references to GEŠPÚ and they generally present boxing in a similar way across different texts.

One inventory, known as the “Cults of Ḫakmiš”<sup>43</sup> (CTH 526.14.), contains three references to boxing as part of various festivals. We read, for example:

PANI DINGIR-lim GEŠPÚ *bulbiliya tieškanzi duškiškanzi*

Before the god, they step into the ring to box and wrestle. They rejoice (KUB 25.23 i 21’–22’).

This formula is found in numerous Hittite texts, referencing boxing in front of a god, i.e., a cultic image, usually one that has been brought out of its sanctuary to a remote location. In a related text (CTH 526.18), which mentions only wrestling, designated women place a garland on the deity, and on the officiating priest. From the texts, an adumbrant vision emerges of boxing as a sacred activity, carried out as the consummation of a joyful, much-anticipated event. The word *bulbiliya*, sometimes coöcurring with GEŠPÚ in the festival texts, has been firmly reconstructed as ‘wrestling’. In the text above, the phrase lacks a conjunction between GEŠPÚ and *bulbiliya*, so it is not clear whether boxing and wrestling are described asyndetically, or whether the practice mentioned is a kind of boxing–wrestling, like the later Greek *pankration* (Puhvel 1988, p. 29).

the Sumerogram in question frequently coöccurs (Carter 1988, p. 186).

<sup>42</sup> CTH 527; see below for an extended discussion of one such artifact in the shape of a fist.

<sup>43</sup> The city of Ḫakmiš was most likely located in or near modern Amasya, in the mountains above the Black Sea coast (Cammarosano 2018, p. xxv).

Much hinges on the translation of the verb *dus̩k-*, which is nearly ubiquitous in mentions of Hittite boxing. Some translators have rendered the verb phrase as ‘they entertain (the deity)’ (Hazenbos 2003, p. 36) or ‘they rejoice over (the god)’ (Cammarosano 2018, p. 365) with no firm resolution as to whether the exuberance associated with the verb *dus̩k-* has an external object or not. It is likely that the god himself was the most significant spectator of the Hittite boxing matches. The object of veneration in the text quoted above is a mountain god named Ḫalwannaš. In another text, CTH 526.34, telestic boxing takes place in honor of the mountain god Pahušanuwaš (Hazenbos 2003, pp. 91–93). Elsewhere, a tutelary god, known only by the Sumerian designation <sup>4</sup>LAMMA<sup>44</sup> and an otherwise unknown deity, Kurhazuššaraš, are mentioned (Hazenbos 2003, p. 127). In “The Cults of Ḥakmiš”, gods from the towns of Urišta and perhaps Parduwata were honored by the fisticuffs, the former being the origin of the mountain god Ḫalwannaš previously mentioned.<sup>45</sup> The god of Parduwata is unnamed.

Why did Hittite boxing take place in association with mountain worship? According to one scholar, “[T]he numinous nature of mountains, which after all constituted the most impressive features of the topography of the Hittite homeland, rendered them an appropriate location—that is, sacred space—for making contact with para-human elements of the cosmos beyond Storm-gods and the mounts themselves” (Beckman 2013, p. 155). That boxing was carried out in this setting reaffirms the sacral nature of pugilism among the Hittites. Mountain deities were often associated with hunting, due presumably to the availability of wild game in these remote, formidable locations. Perhaps boxing served as a rite of passage for young men before they were allowed to hunt. In any case, there is plenty of evidence that boxing in Hittite culture was strongly associated with sacred festivity, as was the case in Egypt and Sumer, and much later in Etruria.

The seasonal timing of Hittite pugilism is also relevant. Boxing festivities in Anatolia appear to have taken place in the spring (Cammarosano 2018, pp. 363, 367, 369); one such account is preceded by the words, “When in spring it thunders...” (KUB 25.34 i 8'). This is the first clear indication we have of a seasonal component to boxing.<sup>46</sup> We note elsewhere that traditional boxing in Russia typically occurred from late winter through spring and that folk boxing matches in the Americas still occur in the spring. Given the inter-hemispheric nature of this pattern, it is tempting to reason that male–male aggression (perhaps as a form of competition for mates) occurs around the Vernal Equinox. However, there is no clear evidence that male testosterone levels, which may lead to increased aggression, change seasonally (Smith et al. 2013) and (modern) monthly birthrates do not support such a hypothesis, either. Nevertheless, dramatic increases in temperatures, accompanied by renewal and growth in the animal and vegetal worlds, seem to have a deep spiritual and æsthetic resonance among humans. For the Hittites, too, spring was a special time associated, in particular, with the return of unstable weather. The katabatic weather god Telipinu was ritually evoked from the dark earth to again unleash storms and life-sustaining rainwater on Ḥatti-land. Exactly what connection the Hittites drew between the natural changes of springtime and boxing is unclear. Boxing in some American traditions is explicitly associated with rainfall—the pugilist’s

<sup>44</sup>For the Hittites, many deities were referenced by the Sumerogram <sup>4</sup>LAMMA. They were commonly worshiped as protectors of objects, locations, and of both mortal and divine beings (McMahon 1991).

<sup>45</sup>It has been speculated that Urišta and Parduwata had been occupied by enemies of the Hittites so that their gods were revered in neighboring Ḥakmiš (Cammarosano 2018, p. 359).

<sup>46</sup>In Section 2.2, we remarked on the possibility that the boxing plaque from the Sin Temple at Khafājah depicts a springtime festival.

dripping blood functions analogically as precipitation. Whether such an association existed among the Bronze Age Hittites is worthy of consideration.

Finally, it may be instructive to look closely at the verbs used in these texts, as they provide us with extra information about Hittite boxing praxis. The verb *tiya-* is inflected in the third person plural, as in the quote above. This verb is translated in other contexts as ‘go’, ‘walk’, ‘go on’ or even ‘stay’. According to some scholars, this verb indicates motion *into* a space. In the Hittite boxing texts, no preposition is provided nor is GEŠPÚ inflected for case. Moreover, the verb often (though not exclusively) occurs with the infix -ške- (as in the quote above). The infix is sometimes translated as an imperfective marker and sometimes as a marker of incipient action, e.g., “They start to step in”. The verb is often rendered ‘step into’ in the Hittite boxing texts, e.g., Cammarosano (2018, p. 365). Into what are the fighters stepping, or beginning to step? Cammarosano takes the liberty of translating the goal of the action as ‘a fight’, i.e., “they step into a fight”. In our own translation, we suggest the pugilists are stepping into a designated location for combat, i.e., a ‘ring’. We emphasize, however, that there is no explicit goal of the verb *tiya-* in the original texts and so the ‘ring’ can only be inferred (tenuously) from the semantics of the verb itself.

In a festival text (KBO 23.55), domesticated ungulates participate in a bloodsport closely associated with the activity of boxers. In fact, it can be reasoned that the Hittite text refers to the agon of both boxers and beasts by the same word, *tarpa*. According to the text, after the pugilists step into *tarpa*, four rams step into *tarpa*, followed by several bulls which do the same.

The word *tarpa* is unfortunately little understood, though recognized by most authorities as a bit of “fight game terminology” (Soysal 2003, p. 105). One scholar has argued that *tarpa* is a ceremony for the victorious boxers (as in the Patroclan games of the *Iliad*), where rams and bulls are the prizes (Puvel 1988, p. 30). Despite some potential links between *tarpa* and the Greek and Sanskrit words for ‘delight’ and ‘satisfaction’, we prefer the interpretation in which animals are compelled to fight one another, mirroring the actions of the boxers. Indeed, we might posit an etymological association of our own, linking Hittite *tarpa* to Proto-Slavic \**tvrpti* ‘to suffer, endure’.

In the festival text, after the men box, several bulls enter the *tarpa*. The verb *tiya-* ‘enter, step into’ is the same one used for humans who ‘enter’ GEŠPÚ in this scene, as well as in the “Cults of Ḫakmiš”. For this reason, and in line with Soysal’s claim that *tarpa tiya-* is a “reciprocal aggressive behavior or violent act” (op. cit.) we conjecture that *tarpa* is a bloodsport for animals.<sup>47</sup>

That the *tarpa* bloodsport accompanies boxing is consistent with numerous visual parallels between the agonistics of men and animals, witnessed, for example, on the cylinder seal of Alalakh and in the greater context of the Boxing Boys fresco at Akrotiri, both of which are likely contemporaneous with the late Bronze Age festival texts found at Ḫattuša.<sup>48</sup> It is not hard to imagine that Hittite festivals involved both types of bloodsport—human and

<sup>47</sup> We are not the first to offer this hermeneutic of *tarpa*, though we are moved to more explicit argumentation. One authority has hypothesized that the *tarpa tiya-* act may be translated as “ram- and bull-wrestling (?)” (Hoffner 1978, p. 247). Another explicitly states that the animals fight (Gurney 1977, p. 207).

<sup>48</sup> We will take up the connection between animal bloodsport and its relation to boxing elsewhere. For now, we note that there is no doubt that the revival of boxing in early modern England was closely associated with aleatory omachy, and adopted many of its conventions for, *inter alia*, weighing and ‘setting-to’ the adversaries, as well as counting them out.

animal—in tandem. Given the choice of animals for *tarpa*, we are inclined to believe that the Hittites perceived similarities in the way boxers engage with their fists and the way rams and bulls engage with their horns.<sup>49</sup>

Bulls are still set against each other in many parts of the world, including Turkey, where the sport is known as *boğā güreşī* ‘bull wrestling’; in the Balkans it is called *borbe bikova*, ‘fight of bulls’. Bull wrestling also takes place in the Ajara province of Georgia (Shamiladze 1967). Though lesser known, bloodsport between rams was documented in Georgia (relatively close to the Hittite homelands) as late as the nineteenth century (Roskoschny 1884). A common practice in and around the Georgian capital at the time, *q'ocebis brdzola* ‘ram wrestling’ is well-described by the poet Ioseb Grishashvili (Grishashvili 1927, pp. 20–21). Three-year old rams, called *erk'emali* or *q'ochi*,<sup>50</sup> were kept on a leash to prevent them from butting heads with any other animal before the fight; this was believed to make them angrier. They were fed only bread. Moreover, their horns were filed to irritate them and thus stimulate aggression. Finally, on the day of the fight the rams were adorned with a collar studded with colorful stones and they were drugged with liquid barley. On the way to the arena, the rams were paraded through the streets in a four-wheeled cart, to the cheers of the pedissequous crowd. After his discussion of ram-wrestling, Grishashvili immediately turns to native Georgian boxing, called *k'rivi*, recognizing the inherent parallel between the two activities.<sup>51</sup> He writes, “The idle citizen of Tbilisi likes a fight, whether the rivals meet in front of an indifferent beauty or they release fighting cocks or *erk'emali* rams into a ring” (*ibid.*, p. 20).<sup>52</sup>

The festival text that mentions *tarpa* also contains what may be the earliest commentary on a boxing match—predating Homer by as much as half a millennium. While the language is somewhat cryptic (most Hittite texts are), it nonetheless presents compelling evidence regarding the behavior of Hittite boxers in the ring (Gilan 2001, pp. 116–118). Immediately before the passage regarding *tarpa*, we read the following:

*mabhan anzel laknuzi na=at palwanzi apaša ANA DINGIR<sup>LIM</sup> UŠKEN nu anzel  
paršana-[x]-aizi*

When our [man] lays him out, [the crowd] cheers and he bows down before  
the deity, and our [man] squats (кв 23.55 21'–23').

It does not take much imagination to fill in the blanks: the crowd favorite (*anzel* ‘our’ [man]) defeats his opponent with a devastating blow (*laknu-* ‘cause to fall’). The crowd cheers (*palwa-*) ‘our’ man’s victory. The defeated boxer is compelled to bow (*ušken*) before the cultic image of the deity. Meanwhile, ‘our’ man, the champion, crouches (*paršnai-*), resting while he awaits his next opponent.<sup>53</sup>

The textual sources support an interpretation of Hittite boxing consistent with observations we made in our earlier study of the Sumerian variety. The Hittites boxed at holy mountain sites; the Sumerians did so in temple courtyards. The sacred setting of pugilism in the

<sup>49</sup>This is evidently true of the Minoans, as well, who juxtaposed the famous ‘Boxing Boys’ with antelope engaged in a sylvanian tussle.

<sup>50</sup>The term *q'ochi* can also be used to describe a man who is able to fight well.

<sup>51</sup>Both forms of bloodsport are described in a single section, entitled *k'rivi* ‘boxing’.

<sup>52</sup>“Истому тбилисцу нравится бой—сходятся ли соперники на глазах у равнодушной красавицы, выпускают ли в круг бойцовых петухов или баранов-эркемалн.”

<sup>53</sup>It is our experience that a crouching posture is readily adopted by exhausted boxers who do not benefit from a stool to sit on between rounds.

ancient Near East betokens the transcendent power boxing had over fighters and audiences in the ancient world. Supernatural beings associated with boxing in both cultures were storm and mountain gods (Numušda and Martu in “The Marriage of Martu” and Ḫalwannaš and Paļušanuwaš, *intera alia*, in the Hittite cult inventories). As personifications of the destructive forces of nature, these gods were aptly associated with brutal monomachy.<sup>54</sup>

Two pieces of artwork are suggestive of boxing in ancient Anatolia. The first is a cylinder seal, most likely executed by an Assyrian artisan and used by a merchant at Kaneš, the early capital of the Hittite kingdom (Figure 23). The merchant community was largely, if not exclusively, made up of Assyrian traders and so the object is not necessarily reflective of Hittite boxing. It probably has more to do with boxing traditions in Mesopotamia (Section 2.2) and the Levant (Section 2.4). Nonetheless, the seal may be a clue as to the introduction of boxing to the Hittites.

The boxers stride towards one another with their arms crossed. The arm closest to the viewer is bent at the elbow but points to the ground rather than towards the adversary. The boxer at left is naked while the boxer at right wears a belt. Both wear caps. The boxer on the right is bearded. A lamb or goat occupies the “prize” position between them. Two figures stand to the left; one holds a lamb or kid. The figure closest to the fighters is kilted and gestures towards them. This figure is most likely the official by now familiar from glyptic representations of boxing in the Levant (Section 2.4). In the terminal of the seal we find a personage with his foot resting on the head of a slaughtered bull and his arms lifting up the animal’s hindquarters. The figure is probably intended to represent a divine being like Gilgamesh—or perhaps Enkidu—slaughtering the bull of heaven. The head of the divine being is eroded beyond recognition. Thus, the seal may be a depiction of the boxing matches that took place (though at considerable remove of time and space) in the holy month of Gilgamesh (described in Section 2.2).

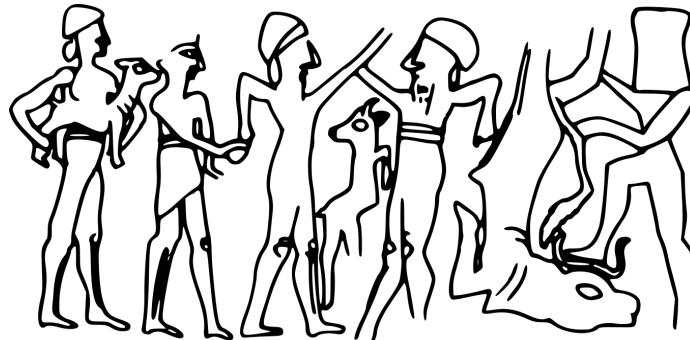


Figure 23: Impression of a cylinder seal from Kaneš, in Anatolia, ca. 2000 BC. The seal is almost certainly of Assyrian origin (Teissier 1984, Seal No. 386).

The other artifact associated with pugilism in ancient Anatolia is of Hittite origin, though its connection to boxing is more speculative. Perhaps one of the most famous pieces of Hittite material culture, a 14th-century silver drinking vessel in the shape of a fist (Boston Mu-

<sup>54</sup>Traditional Slavic fistfighting was analogously associated with the storm god Perun.

seum of Fine Arts, No. 2004.2230), is a remarkable piece in its own right (Figure 2.5). Here we emphasize its potential relationship to Hittite pugilism. The realistically-rendered fist includes a “bar[-]like object with rounded edges... decorated with palmettes” that protrudes slightly beyond the little finger (Pilavci 2017, p. 167). We believe that this object is a fist-load weapon—a smaller, lighter version of the curious weapons used extensively in early Iron Age boxing matches of northern Italy and the eastern Alps.<sup>55</sup> Carrying the weapon in the fist, just as it is represented in the Hittite artifact, would allow a boxer to deliver significantly heavier blows (Lazar 2011).

If the Hittite drinking vessel is intended to represent a boxer’s fist, then it is necessary to discuss the intricately carved cuff or bracelet that the boxer wears. Wrist adornment among ancient pugilists is well attested, including among Ugaritic boxers (Figure 19) and in representations of boxers on a relief (No. 10039) held in the Iraq Museum (Poliakoff 1987, p. 172, fn. 3). The Eshnunna boxers wear bracelets (Figure 13), as do the boxers on another terracotta plaque housed at the Louvre (Figure 14). In Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2022b), we will observe the use of bracelets among Minoan boxers. The rich detail of the Hittite artifact allows us to see what might have been inscribed on this fairly ubiquitous piece of boxing attire.

The bracelet on the Hittite fist is not illustrated with a pugilistic scene, as we might expect. Instead, it is decorated with a repoussé procession of musicians and others bearing a variety of potulents and esculents. They all advance towards a divine being, most likely the weather god (Pilavci 2017, p. 182). At the far right of the procession, another deity, perhaps a vegetation god, stands. Surrounded by flora, the god’s presence may indicate that the scene depicts a springtime festival—like those in which boxing occurred. At the head of the procession, nearest the main deity and before an altar, another figure, identified by a hieroglyph as Hittite king Tudhaliya IV, performs a libation using a pitcher. According to Pilavci (2017), the libation is “the central act of worship to encounter the divine” (p. 183). While we find little on the bracelet to suggest a direct link to pugilism, it was not uncommon for Hittite artisans to fashion drinking vessels in the form of fists and for these to be used in ceremonial settings (Güterbock and Kendall 1995). These vessels, known as GEŠPÚ in numerous textual sources and made of a variety of materials, were likely synecdochical for boxing itself and further suggest the high esteem in which the Hittites held sacred pugilism.<sup>56</sup> The band around the boxer’s wrist reinforces the ties between Hittite boxing and the worship activities described in the documents reviewed above.

### 3 Egypt

As we have demonstrated, the visual and textual corpus of boxing in ancient Western Asia is of considerable magnitude and complexity. Egypt, on the other hand, presents us with comparatively few examples of boxing as a deeply-ingrained cultural practice.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Representations of these implements, which are often described as ‘barbells’, will be discussed at length in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023).

<sup>56</sup> A raised fist is frequently attested in Hittite iconography, where it has traditionally been interpreted as a signal of reverence (Güterbock and Kendall 1995, p. 55), or perhaps as a salutation. We find it equally if not more plausible that the fist expressed power and strength, and hearkened directly to the sacred pugilistic encounters which, as we have demonstrated, were of considerable significance to the Hittites.

<sup>57</sup> Wrestling and stick-fighting, on the other hand, are amply attested. It is possible, though few boxing artifacts remain in Egypt, that Egyptian pugilism was in fact highly influential for other cultures, including those of the



Figure 24: A Bronze Age drinking vessel in the shape of a fist (Boston Museum of Fine Arts, No. 2004.2230). The object was created in the Hittite kingdom around 1300 BC and bears a hieroglyphic identifying one of its rulers. The fingers curl around a bar with rounded edges, embossed with a palmette on the end. It protrudes slightly beyond the *digitus auricularis*. This bar is likely a fist-load weapon.

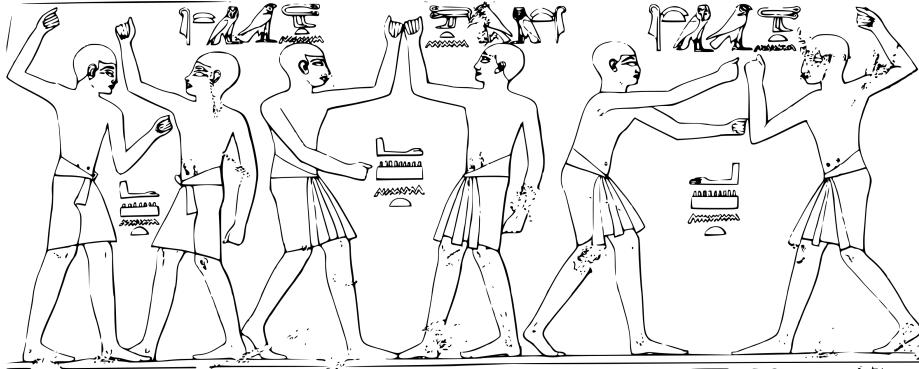


Figure 25: Three pairs of boxers from the Tomb of Kheruef. At waist level between fighters are the hieroglyphs for ‘boxing’; above them are three instances of the phrase, “Horus ‘Appearing in Truth’ has prevailed”.

The Tomb of Kheruef (Tomb 192 at Western Thebes) holds the most information we have about boxing in Ancient Egypt. The boxing scenes depicted in the lower register of the west portico of the north wing of the Tomb of Kheruef are associated with the raising of the *djed* column at the Festival of Sed during the reign of Amenhotep III. Six pairs of boxers are represented in a variety of poses (see Figures 25 and 26). The boxers in two registers (three pairs of boxers in each register) strike similar postures and bear similar, though not identical, hieroglyphic inscriptions.

Fakhry (1943) states that the boxers depicted in the Tomb of Kheruef are priests, based on their apparel. Indeed, a functionary designated as *nb, h3w-* ‘fighter priest’ had some role to play in the Apophis/Apep ritual. This specialized priest was the ritual opponent of Apophis, who appears in art as a giant serpent or crocodile. The nature of the fight is unknown; it may have involved the desecration of a figure associated with Apophis. However, a fight between priests reenacting the conflict of Ra and Apophis is not out of the question, given the use of a derivative of the verb *h3* ‘fight’ as the primary designation of the priest in the Apophis ritual. The priest’s job was to fight for a petitioner against his or her Apophis (Ritner 1993, p. 221, fns. 1028–1029).<sup>58</sup> The religious nature of the boxing depicted at the Tomb of Kheruef is undisputed (De Vries 1960, p. 235). However, most of the details remain speculative.

According to one authority, “[A]thletic competitions or demonstrations were conducted as part of the ceremonies of certain Egyptian religious festivals, as is illustrated by the inclusion of pugilistic exercises...in the ceremony of the raising of the Djed-column, as portrayed in the tomb of Kheruef at Thebes” (De Vries 1960, p. 156). The Kheruef reliefs have also been described as “jubilee rites” that had “a proper part to play in the general theme of joy and re-

ancient Mediterranean. For example, in Section 2.4, we mentioned a Levantine cylinder seal with boxers and an Egyptian ankh symbol. Boxing among the Minoans may have been influenced by Egyptian practice, as well, though there is still little conclusive evidence on the matter.

<sup>58</sup> According to available interpretations of the scenes at the Tomb of Kheruef, the fighter priests are participating in a different ritual, unrelated to Apophis/Apep.

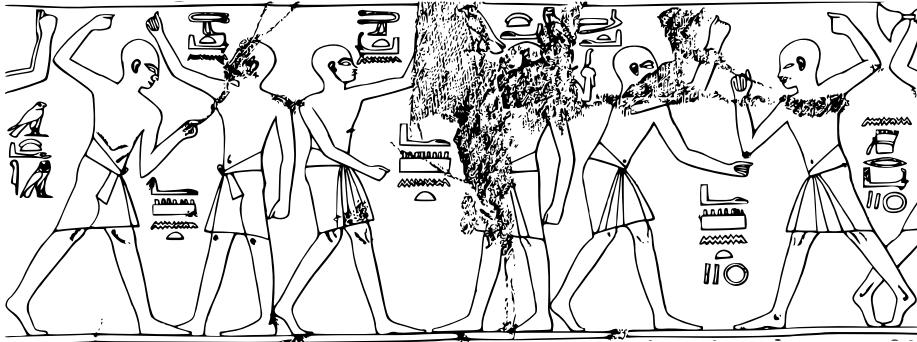


Figure 26: Three more pairs of boxers from the Tomb of Kheruef. In addition to slightly modified hieroglyphic inscriptions found in similar positions in Figure 25, the verb ‘hit’, accompanied by the ditto sign, appears at far right.

lease from anxiety at the accession or rejuvenation of the monarch” (Aldred 1957, p. 116).

Given the natural expectation that the hieroglyphic writing in these registers might help us interpret the significance of the scene, we turn to the hieroglyphs that accompany these eighteenth-dynasty boxers. In Figure 25, between the individual fighters in each pair, we find the same hieroglyphic inscription, transliterated as ‘*mnt*’ and translated as ‘boxing’ (Epigraphic Survey 1980, p. 63). The same term is found between the fighters in each pair in Figure 26; between the rightmost boxers, we find this term followed by the iteration mark, . This may indicate that the scene in Figure 25 is a duplicate of the scene in Figure 26 (De Vries 1960, p. 226). Over each pair of boxers in Figure 25 we find the inscription , translated as “Horus ‘Appearing in Truth’ has prevailed” (Epigraphic Survey 1980, p. 64). This appears in variant forms (with additional hieroglyphs, sometimes split up, and rearranged).<sup>59</sup> The rather cryptic statement has been interpreted to mean that “these ceremonial games were performed in honor of the king” (De Vries 1960, p. 228). It is also possible that the sequence of hieroglyphs “states the purpose of the contests,” although not even a tentative explanation along these lines is provided (*ibid.*). Above and between the two leftmost pairs of boxers in Figure 26 we find an abbreviated version of this statement. Elsewhere we find the verb ‘hit’.<sup>60</sup>

The meaning of the boxing match is still elusive. Beyond controversy is the fact that the larger scene in the Tomb of Kheruef, of which the boxers clearly take part, depicts the raising of the *Djed*-pillar. Egyptologists agree that the captions of the boxing matches indicate that ‘Horus’ is the winner. The role of “fighter priests” who perform ritual combat, perhaps against figurines representing gods or malign forces, has been suggested (Ritner 1993, p. 221, fn. 1029) and may bear some connection to the ritual battle depicted at Kheruef. The raising of the *Djed* is understood to be a reaffirmation of the divine leadership of the pharaoh. It is also strongly linked to the Osirian myth and, more specifically, to the contest

<sup>59</sup>The invariant transliteration used to cover all five instances is *it n Hr b‘m m’ t* (De Vries 1960, p. 225).

<sup>60</sup>These inscriptions occur to the left of the leftmost boxer in Figure 25 (not pictured); and to the right of the rightmost boxer in Figure 26, where it is followed by the iteration mark .

between Set and Horus for the crown. However, the rite, “does not illustrate or re-enact the myth” or “present a logically developing story in a modern sense” (van der Vliet 1989, p. 407).

Osiris was murdered by his brother Set, which naturally led to conflict between the latter and Osiris’ son, Horus. The fate of the cosmos hung in the balance, as would the polity during a microcosmic succession crisis. The spectre of widespread violence could be averted through a contest between the rivals (or, in the case of the Tomb of Kheruef, perhaps, their sacralized proxies). Indeed, zany contests between Set and Horus are something of a subgenre in Ancient Egyptian literature (no extant versions depict a boxing match, however). Set and Horus were such illustrious bruisers that they are referred to simply as “the two fighters” (*āḥawi*) in the Theban recension of the Book of the Dead (Budge 1911, p. 87). In one popular version of the myth, Set issues a challenge: “Let [Horus] come outside with me, then I shall show you that my hands are stronger than his” (Frankfort 1948, p. 128).

Given the argument that the Djed rite was not a literal reenactment of the Osirian myth, it is still possible that the boxing represented a more abstract version of the fight between Set and Horus in which the winner, whoever it turned out to be, became a kind of theophoric version of Horus, as announced by the hieroglyphic caption.<sup>61</sup> According to van der Vliet, “[T]he rite of raising the [D]jed plunges us into the ‘creative darkness of liminality’, out of which a new and stabilized state of political or individual existence is to arise” (1989, p. 41). The fisticuffs that accompany the raising of the Djed arguably represent the resolution of Giard’s “sacrificial crisis”: a violent rivalry is subdued through a no-less violent but nonetheless circumscribed pugilistic encounter, averting the disaster of a succession war (1977, pp. 39–67). While many of the details are yet umbratilous, the representations of boxing at Kheruef may be the clearest extant visual renderings of Bronze Age boxing as a ritual activity.

We also note the posture of the fighters and the techniques they appear to use. Stark differences from the Mesopotamian tradition, observed in the previous sections, are immediately evident. Absent are the crossed arms (even though the feet interrupt one another in the leftmost pairs of each register and legs cross between non-combatants at the far right of Figure 26). No prizes appear between the fighters, only hieroglyphs describing the action. Manifestations of the divine are absent or indirect, perhaps signaled by the hieroglyphic inscriptions. Likewise absent are bracelets, belts, and any suggestion of nudity in the encounter. All the fighters are kilted, as in many West Asian depictions.<sup>62</sup>

Despite persistent claims that Egyptian renderings of human activity are static and stiff, these boxers move in a variety of ways suggestive of uppercuts or shovel-punches, overhand rights, and hammer-blows from above. In two registers, the Kheruef reliefs arguably provide more information about punching technique than any artifact in the ancient corpus we have discussed so far.

The Kheruef boxers’ foot position is also remarkably realistic, a detail ignored in the visual depictions uncovered in Mesopotamia and its satellites. Fighters lift the back foot so that the heel is off the ground, providing maneuverability and extra “reach” to more effectively strike the adversary. The leftmost pair of boxers in Figure 25, by contrast, are notably flat-footed. To the trained modern eye, the most whimsical technique is that of the left-hand

<sup>61</sup> Another, less dramatic interpretation, is that Horus merely invested his power in the victorious boxer and thereby himself prevailed.

<sup>62</sup> There are only a few Mesopotamian portrayals in which the fighters are naked. Opificus (1961, p. 169) reports an unpublished terracotta plaque from Assur, conserved in Istanbul, where the boxers, or perhaps wrestlers, are nude. One figure grabs the raised left foot of his opponent (Photo No. 18923, Vorderasiatischen Museum, Berlin).

fighter in the rightmost pair of each register. This boxer casts both arms forward in an offensive maneuver observed only among the most untrained modern fighters. It would never be tolerated in a contemporary boxing gym, where the classic boxing stance allows for only one hand to strike while the other “guards” in defense. Assuming that the image is a realistic depiction, it is probable that the boxer who adopted this technique would suffer from the many sharp blows he was unable to block. But he might land a few good ones, too.

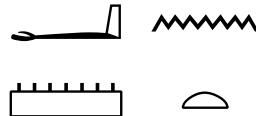


Figure 27: Hieroglyphs for ‘*mnt* ‘boxing’ found in the Tomb of Kheruef, associated with scenes of pugilism (De Vries 1960, p. 224).



Figure 28: Hieroglyphs for the formula *it n Hr b'm m' t* ‘Horus ‘appearing in truth’ has prevailed’ found in the Tomb of Kheruef, associated with scenes of pugilism (De Vries 1960, p. 224).

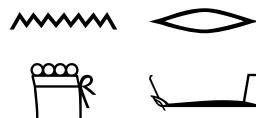


Figure 29: Hieroglyphs for *ndr* ‘strike’ found in the Tomb of Kheruef, associated with scenes of pugilism (De Vries 1960, p. 224).

In the Tomb of Meryra II (ca. 13th century BC), two figures in the “Tribute of the South” (East Wall) are engaged in barefisted boxing. Nearby spectators cheer. Wrestlers are located close at hand, as in Mesopotamian reliefs (Davies 1905, Pl. 38). The boxers’ hands do not appear wrapped or gloved; both arms are raised in a confused jumble of offensive and defensive maneuver, with the figure on the right raising an open hand, perhaps to ward off his opponent. The figure on the left lands a right to the jaw of the figure on the right, whose head rocks backward from the impact.

The Meryra II scene is regarded as an entertainment for the pharaoh Akhenaten or Amenhotep IV (De Vries 1960, p. 239, fn. 1). According to De Vries, the scene resembles “a mixture of punching, pushing, and semi-clinch that one sees even in modern boxing bouts” (*ibid.*).

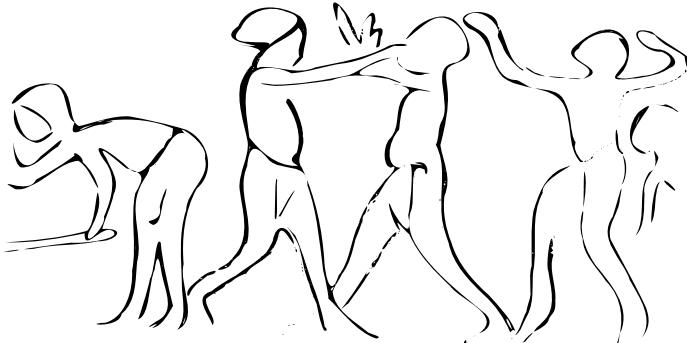


Figure 30: Boxing figures from “Tribute of the South” (East Wall), Tomb of Meryra II.

The raucous joy of the spectator to the right of the combatants is suggestive of the entertainment aspect of this match (and reminiscent of an analogous figure in the Alalakh cylinder seal, Figure 18), as opposed to the more formal, ritual aspects of pugilism emphasized in the Tomb of Kheruef.

A painting at the Tomb of Khons (Western Thebes tomb 31) depicts two figures standing atop a boat. Although not a boxing scene, as the fighters or dancers wield sticks in their hands (the Egyptian stick-fighting tradition of *nabbút*), Decker (2001) points out that the site of the contest creates an effect similar to that of a modern boxing ring, but with a notable and unprecedented consequence: the loser surely falls from the roof into the river! This is one of the earliest depictions of a fighting match between two combatants which is clearly constrained by a physical feature of the space.

## 4 Conclusion

Boxing’s long childhood in early history reveals the distinctive features of orthograde dual fistfighting we can recognize as the earliest traditions in the boxing family. Whether or not boxing was polygenetically discovered by different civilizations, it exhibited both surprising fecundity and stability throughout the Middle Eastern cultures who adopted it for ritual, entertainment, or sacral purposes.

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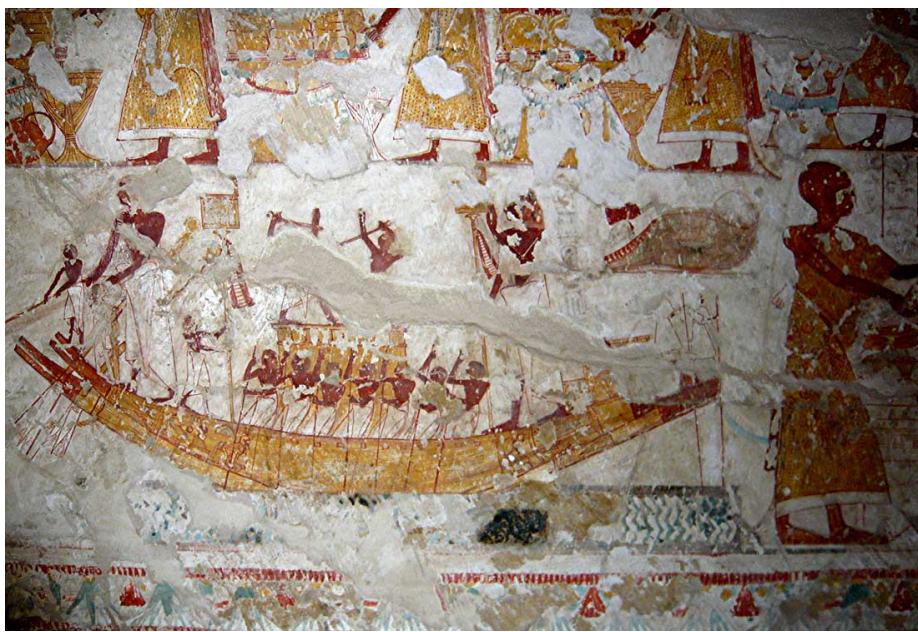


Figure 31: Boat scene from the Tomb of Khons with two stick-wielding figures standing on the roof of the boat cabin.

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- ~2022.6.2. First public release.
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