"Trials of Strength"

Athletics in Mesopotamia

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Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk (modern Warka in southern Iraq), was on his way to the place where a couch had been prepared for the "sacred marriage" between him and the goddess Ishbara. When he approached the place where this wedding was to be performed, Enkidu, who had been sent into Uruk to compete with Gilgamesh, stood in the street to bar the way. Gilgamesh and Enkidu began to wrestle.

This episode is preserved in the Old Babylonian version of the Epic of Gilgamesh (ca. 1700 B.C.E.; the original is housed in The University Museum):

Enkidu barred the gate with his foot, they seized each other, they bent down like expert (wrestlers), they destroyed the doorpost, the wall shook.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu were holding each other, like expert (wrestlers) they bent down, they destroyed the doorpost, the wall shook.

Gilgamesh bent (his one knee), with the (other) foot on the ground.

The last two lines of this passage describe the position of the victorious wrestler who has succeeded in lifting his opponent from the ground, holding him by his girdle over his head while bending his own knee.

The "heroes" depicted on Near Eastern seals frequently wear girdles, even when they are otherwise unclad. I refer the reader to a well-known statuette from Khafaji dating to about 2600 B.C.E. where each wrestler is gripping the girdle of the other (Fig. 1; Speiser 1937, Fig. 4). From roughly the same period is a fragment of a stela on which we find the oldest representation of wrestlers (Fig. 3). Both these examples indicate that the Mesopotamians practiced belt wrestling. On some seals we see the victorious hero with a bent knee, holding a lion over his head. Even if the hero was wrestling with a bull, that animal was wearing a belt (as did the hero) that the wrestler grasped (see Gordon 1936: 5). The passage in the Old Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh has to be interpreted as representing belt wrestling: the victorious wrestler bent one knee on the ground and lifted his adversary over his head (even if it is not explicitly said in the text).

Let us now deal with another test from the Old Babylonian period, written in Sumerian, concerning the marriage of Mardu (CBS 14061, copied in Chiera as no. 58; original in The University Museum). (Mardu was a west Semitic god, brought into Mesopotamia by the invading Amorites from the west.) Mardu is unmarried and he asks his mother to obtain a wife for him. Her advice is: "Take a wife wheresoever you raise (your) eyes, take a wife wheresoever your heart leads you!" A feast is celebrated in Ninab to which Mardu invites the god Numushda, his wife, and his beautiful daughter named Adgarkidig. During this festival, athletic games took place
in the great courtyard of the temple. In these games Mardu not only defeats his adversaries but also kills them. Nunuschia, who rejoices at Mardu's strength, offers him silver and precious stones which Mardu, however, refuses to accept. He wants Adgarikind and Nunuschia gives her to Mardu as wife. The passages from the Old Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh and the marriage of Mardu might point to an old custom of arranging athletes and trials of strength as a part of preparations for a wedding.

"in trials of strength and athletics I am (foremost). . . ."

Shulgi, the second king of the famous dynasty of Ur (a Sumerian site in modern-day Iraq) who reigned from 2044–2034 B.C.E., was a man who accomplished in all kinds of intellectual, cultic, and military activity and certainly also in athletics (see Fig. 4). In trials of strength and athletics I am foremost; in the great courtyard as on the battlefield, who can oppose me?

I am the one who is strongest and most skilled in athletics and trials of strength. [Shulgi Hymn C, lines 131ff]

Here, the great courtyard of the temple is the site of athletic contests as it was in the marriage of Mardu and in the literary composition we call "Curse of the City of Agade." "like an athlete coming into the great courtyard" (line 162).

Westerners often in an Old Babylonian letter found at Mari. King Samsi-Addu sends a letter to his son Jashmu-Addu, king of Mari, complaining about the way he directs the war against his enemies: "You and the court continually devise stratagems for killing each other just like wrestlers, one seeking stratagems against the other." (Dossin 1997: No. 5, lines 7–9). A legal text from about 2000 B.C.E. mentions wrestling. A contract has killed Mr. Kali. Gazzani was questioned,