

Wrestling in Ancient Nubia

Scott T. Carroll
Asst. Professor
Dept. of History
Gordon College*

'The history of ancient sports traditionally begins and ends in the classical arena. Perhaps this is because of the plethora of extant sources about Greek and Roman sports. Behind this narrow focus is the naive assumption that Greek sports were without antecedents in their Mediterranean environment. In the field of Sport History, several ancient historians, in recent years, have made substantial contributions aimed at correcting the existing Greco-Roman insularity.¹

The most popular athletic contest in the classical world was wrestling. The literary and material culture is replete with evidence illustrating the prevalence of wrestling and the wrestling motif. This study will attempt to demonstrate that wrestling enjoyed a prominence in ancient Nubia, evidenced several centuries before Homer's wrestling accounts. Ancient iconographic and literary evidence, combined with ethnographical studies, will be used to elucidate the popularity of wrestling among the Nubian people.

Evidence for Wrestling in Ancient Nubia

Wrestling was extremely popular with the ancient Egyptians, judging by the frequency with which the sport appears in Egyptian art.² There are a host of wrestling scenes which first appear in the Old Kingdom tomb of Ptahhotep (2300 B.C.) through the time of the New Kingdom (2000-1085 B.C.). Some of the most interesting scenes show foreigners wrestling against the Egyptians. Nubian wrestlers appear at least five times in Egyptian art. Our information about ancient Nubian wrestling is dependent on these glimpses in Egyptian

* The author is grateful to the anonymous readers for their constructive contributions to this study.

1. See Labib Boutros, *Phoenician Sport: Its Influence on the Origin of the Olympic Games* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1981); Wolfgang Decker, *Die physische Leistung Pharaos* (Köln: Historisches Institut der Deutschen Sporthochschule Köln, 1971); Carl Diem, *Weltgeschichte des Sports und der Leibeserziehung* (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1960); A. D. Touny and S. Wenig, *Der Sport im alten Ägypten* (Leipzig: Verlag für Kunst und Wissenschaft, 1969); and Ingomar Weiler mit Christoph Ulf, *Der Sport bei den alten Welt* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981).

2. For other studies, see W. Decker, *Die physische Leistung Pharaos*. pp. 66-70; Diem, *Weltgeschichte des Sports*: V. Olivová, *Sports and Games in the Ancient World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984); Touny and Wenig, *Der Sport*, pp. 15-21; H. Wilsdorf, *Ringkampf im alten Ägypten* (Wützburg, 1939); John A. Wilson, "Ceremonial Games of the New Kingdom," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 27 (1931): 211-20; W. Decker, *Quellentexte zu Sport und Körperkultur im alten Ägypten* (Sankt Augustin: Verlag Hans Richarz, 1975), pp. 81-84; Idem, "Neue Dokumente zum Ringkampf im alten Ägypten," *Kölner Beiträge zur Sportwissenschaft, Schorndorf 5* (1976): 7-24; Idem, "Ringgen," in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* V, 265f.; Idem, *Sport und Spiel im alten Ägypten* (Monaco: Beck, 1987), pp. 80-90; and M. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

iconography together with a late description found in Heliodorus' *Aithiopica*. This section will analyze the ancient evidence and attempt to reconstruct an ancient Nubian wrestling tradition.

The history of Egypt supplies an ongoing story of economic interaction with Nubia which began in the Old Kingdom and lasted through the Persian Conquest of Egypt in 525 B.C.³ Initially, the limits of interaction constituted Nubian trade of exotic goods through their own middlemen into the hands of Egyptian merchants. Apparently, the trade was not reciprocal. Egyptian goods are scarce in Nubia throughout the Old Kingdom. There is also evidence that suggests that several of the Old Kingdom Pharaohs sent military expeditions into Nubia. These expeditions increase during the First Intermediate Period (2250-2000 B.C.), as does evidence of Egyptian wares in Nubia. It is not until the Middle Kingdom (2000-1780 B.C.) that there was a concerted Pharaohic effort to protect Egyptian economic interests to the south.

The frequency of punitive campaigns increased during the New Kingdom (1546-1085 B.C.). Egypt sent expeditions deep into Nubia with the hope of circumventing tribal chiefs, the traditional middlemen in Egypto-Nubian trade. Eventually, the Nubian middlemen were eliminated. The Egyptians divided and controlled Nubia. The New Kingdom Pharaohs demanded the items that they formerly purchased from the Nubians as tribute. Exotic goods, animals, minerals and slaves were presented as tribute to the Pharaoh. The New Kingdom conducted a policy of formal imperial exploitation in Nubia. All of the Nubian wrestling reliefs are from the height of this process of Egyptian imperialization during the New Kingdom.

The earliest portrayal of Nubian wrestlers is found on a wall painting from the tomb of Tyanen, an Egyptian officer (d. 1410 B.C.)⁴ (See Figure 1). The picture shows five men marching together, with the last man carrying a standard which has two wrestlers on it. All but one of the men have Nubian physical characteristics. The contrast between the Nubian wrestlers' girth and the trim Egyptian, is pronounced. Perhaps the Nubians were a detachment of wrestlers. The sticks that the first four Nubians brandished were used in a dueling competition. Depictions of stick fighting and wrestling competitions often appear together, implying that the same people participated in both events.⁵ Certainly these combative sports were used for military training. While it is known that the

3. For Egypto-Nubian relations, see B. Trigger, *Nubia Under the Pharaohs* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976). For general historical and archaeological coverage of ancient Nubia, consult *The Cambridge History of Africa: c. 500 B.C.-A.D. 1050*, Vol. 2, ed. J. D. Fage (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978); G. Mokhtar, ed., *UNESCO General History of Africa*, Vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Roland Oliver and Brian M. Fagan, *Africa in the Iron Age: c. 500 B.C. to A.D. 1400* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Anthony J. Arkell, *A History of the Sudan From the Earliest Times to 1821*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1961); W. Y. Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); and H. A. MacMichael, *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan*. 2 volumes (London: Cambridge University Press, 1922); S. Wenig, "Nubien," in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, IV: 526-32.

4. See A. and A. Brack, *Das Grab des Tjanuni-Theban Nr. 74*, (Archäologische Veröffentlichungen 19) (Mainz: Philipp van Zabern, 1977), p. 41, Pls. 8, 28, 32. While the tomb paintings of wrestlers from Beni Hasan depict dark and light participants, it is generally believed that the darker color is not intended to illustrate a different cultural stock. See Decker, *Die physische Leistung Pharaos*, p. 68.

5. M. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports*, pp. 64-67. Note also J. Vandier d' Abbadie, "Deux nouveaux ostraca figures," *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte* 40 (1940): 467-87.



Figure 1. Courtesy of Dr. Artur Brack.

Egyptians recruited Nubian archers into their army, perhaps this picture implies that Nubian wrestlers were also highly esteemed by the Egyptians.

Chronologically, the second illustration of wrestling in ancient Nubia is from a relief in the rock tomb of Meryre (II) (d. 1355 B.C.)⁶ (See Figure 2). Meryre (II) was interred at El-Amarna, the city built by the famed heretic Pharaoh Akhenaton⁷ Meryre (II) was the palace steward for the beautiful Queen Nefertity. The picture on the tomb wall shows King Akhenaton seated at his throne, awaiting tribute from Nubia. The presentation of tribute was celebrated with festivities which included sports competition.⁸ The competition took place before the Pharaoh, his court, nobles, soldiers and ambassadors from foreign lands. The “tribute games” dramatized Egyptian superiority over their subjugated enemies. In Meryre (II)’s tomb, Akhenaton is fittingly entertained by a wrestling match between a Nubian and an Egyptian.

The match between the Egyptian and the Nubian is illustrated from right to left in four “frames.” The Egyptian is wearing the dress of a soldier. In the second frame, the Egyptian has his left arm over and around the Nubian’s head. Penetrating on one knee under his African opponent, the Egyptian simultaneously lifts between the Nubian’s legs while prying in a downward motion on his head. The Nubian is spilled to the ground and lays on his back in the final

6. N. de G. Davies, “The Rock Tombs of El Amarnah: Volume II.” *Archaeological Survey of Egypt* 14 (London, 1905), plate 38.

7. The most recent account of Akhenaten and Amarna is Donald B. Redford, *Akhenaten: The Heretic King* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

8. Wilson, “Ceremonial Games of the New Kingdom,” 211-20.

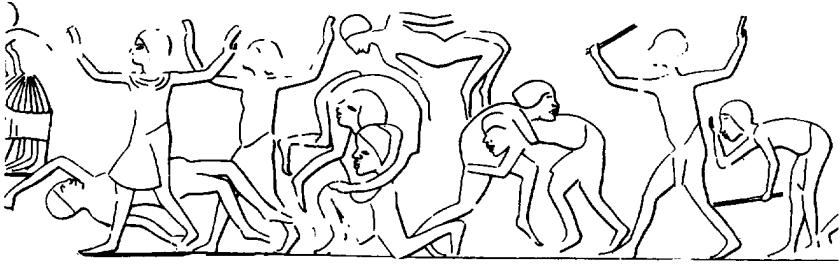


Figure 2. N. de G. Davies, "The Rock Tombs of El Amarnah: Volume II," *Archaeological Survey of Egypt* 14 (London, 1905), pl. 38

frame. The Egyptian wrestler stands over his opponent with raised arms in a traditional victory pose before the Pharaoh.

The third piece of evidence of Nubian wrestling was recently discovered dating also from the Amarna period (1350 B.C.).⁹ Unlike the other scenes, two Nubians wrestled each other as a Nubian woman and a dog looked on, rather than the Pharaoh (See Figure 3). Stick fighters are also depicted on the same sandstone carving. This is the only ancient Nubian wrestling scene informally set in the countryside. Gourds dangling from the wrestlers' loin cloths and a bull in the foreground are of particular interest. The significance of this evidence as it relates to ethnographical data is discussed below.

The last two archaeological indications of Nubian wrestling are from the temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu¹⁰ (See Figure 4). The elaborate frieze is based on a prototype constructed at the Ramsesseum by Ramses II. When it became necessary to repair the center section of the frieze at Medinet Habu, blocks were taken from the Ramsesseum. Artisans skillfully patched the relief,



Figure 3. Courtesy of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut.

9. Labib Habachi, *The Second Stela Of Kamose and His Struggle Against the Hykros Ruler and His Capital*, Abhandlungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Kairo, Ägyptologische Reihe, 8 (Glückstadt, 1972), fig. 12. See also M. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports*, p. 66, Ill. 66.

10. For copies of the text and a description, see: University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications, "Medinet Habu," *Later Historical Records of Ramses III*. Vol. II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932); Uvo Hölscher, "The Mortuary Temple of Ramses III," *The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publication*. Part I, Vol. 54 (1941); Uvo Hölscher and Harold H. Nelson, "Medinet Habu Reports" *Oriental Institute Communications*, Vol. 15 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932).



Figure 4. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

although the difference in the color of the stone used, makes the patchwork clear (See Figure 5). The artisans neglected to amend the text on the blocks used to mend the frieze. In the middle of the elaborate relief, dedicated to Ramses III, there are some praises offered to Ramses II. One block from the Ramsesseum was discarded next to the wall after it had been partially used for repairs. The



Figure 5. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

portion discarded gives an example of a Nubian-Egyptian wrestling match from the days of Ramses II. It is also identical to the depiction on the Medinet Habu frieze (See Figure 6).

The frieze at Medinet Habu is below Pharaoh Ramses III's "Window of Royal Appearance." The Pharaoh would appear in this window to receive the spoils of war and tribute. It is from this vantage point that the Pharaoh would view the "tribute games" conducted in the courtyard before him. The window itself is a visual expression of the ancient notion of "putting lands under one's feet" or "making an enemy one's footstool."¹¹ Realistically fashioned heads of traditional Egyptian enemies are lined up underneath the Royal Window. As many as eleven of the twenty heads have distinct Nubian characteristics. The tribute games are a dramatization of the subjugation of the tribute lands by Egypt (See Figures 7 and 8).

The Medinet Habu frieze displays a wrestling match between a Nubian and an Egyptian. An international court watches the athletic festivities with enthusiasm. The spectators include a Nubian, bedecked with a customary plume and earring (See Figure 9). Apparently, the foreign spectators are emissaries, being entertained, rather than captives forced to witness a display of Pharaohic omnipotence. It is impossible to tell whether or not the Nubian diplomat desired his ethnic compatriot to defeat his Egyptian opponent; but the competition vividly reminded the Nubian diplomat of Egypt's suzerainty over his people. A literary parallel to this panoply is contained in a letter from an Egyptian official to a Nubian prince which states,



Figure 6. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

11. Hölscher and Nelson, "Reports" p. 36.

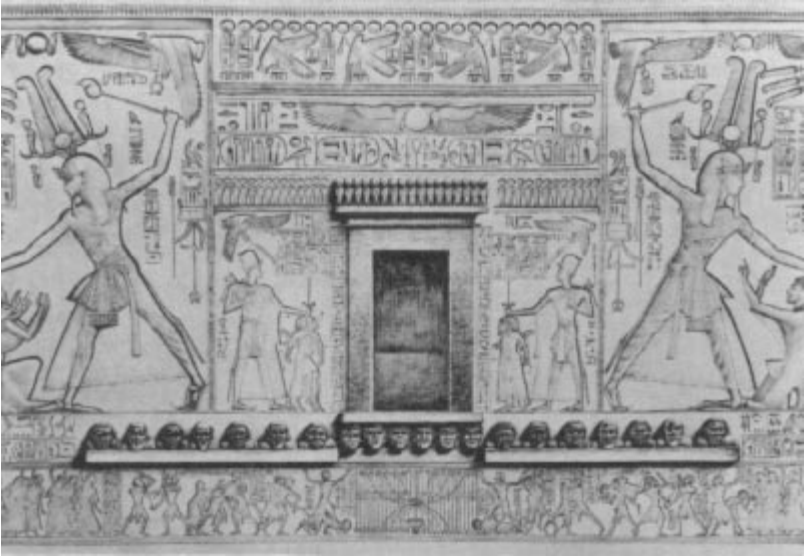


Figure 7. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

Be mindful of the day when tribute is brought when thou passest before the king beneath the window, and the counselors are ranged on either side in front of his majesty, and the chiefs and envoys of all lands stand there marveling and viewing the tribute.¹²

The artist depicts the crowd pressing upon the action and calling out “You are like Montu, O Pharaoh, Life, Prosperity, Health, our good Lord! Amun overthrows for you the foreigners who came to set themselves up against you.”¹³

The Nubian-Egyptian wrestling match on the Medinet Habu relief contains three separate segments, progressing from left to right, with a corresponding text (See Figure 4). In the first section (the group to the right of the stick fighters), the Egyptian wrestler has his Nubian adversary in a choke-hold. A referee with trumpet in hand, stands nearby the grapplers and warns the Egyptian about the illegal move, saying “Take care! You are in the presence of the Pharaoh: Life, Prosperity and Health! Your Lord.”¹⁴ While the games were intended to be a portrayal of Egyptian power over their enemies, this strikingly illustrates that the contests were conducted in fair play (or at least under the illusion of fair play).

In the second segment, the Egyptian is in the process of forcing his Nubian opponent to the ground. The Egyptian grappler taunts his opponent, boasting “Woe to you, O Negro enemy! I will make you take a helpless fall in the presence of the Pharaoh.”¹⁵ In the corresponding scene on the block from the

12. A. Erman, *The Literature of the Ancient Egypt*, trans., A. M. Blackman, (London, 1927). Insert “wrestling” for “tribute” in the quotation and one has an exact description of the Medinet Habu frieze.

13. The copies of the inscriptions in footnotes 13-17 have been taken from J. A. Wilson’s “Ceremonial Games of the New Kingdom,” Pl. 38 no. 16.

14. *Ibid.*, Pl. 38, no. 13.

15. *Ibid.*, Pl. 38, no. 4.



Figure 8. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.



Figure 9. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

Ramsesseum (See Figure 6), the Egyptian wrestler jeers "Alas for you O Negro, [enemy] who boasted with his mouth. Usermare Setepnere is with me against you. You [probably followed by a threat] . . ."16 The Nubian appears defenseless. It is unlikely that the Egyptian's offensive attack could realistically toss anyone to the ground. The Egyptian pries the Nubian's left arm while holding his opponent tightly, driving off of his back right leg. Normally the Egyptian would twist his opponent's left arm so that the Nubian's thumb would face downward, this would straighten out the bent arm and localize maximum pressure against the back of the Nubian's arm. Perhaps this is an oversight by the artist or maybe the historian's inability to properly envision the ancient technique. The leaner Egyptian holds the husky Nubian so tightly that his grip is hunching the Nubian's shoulder. The Nubian makes a feeble attempt to counter the move by wrapping his left leg around the Egyptian's right leg. But the Nubian is being forced with so much strength that both of his feet leave the ground (moments before he lands face-first in the sand).

The final segment in the Medinet Habu frieze shows a victorious Egyptian wrestler standing over his Nubian opponent. The victor's hands are raised in the traditional winner's pose. The Egyptian recites a common victory chant before the Pharaoh, and the dignitaries exclaiming "Amun is the god who decreed the protection against every land to the ruler, O great troop of Usermare. . . ."17 The defeated Nubian is forced to acknowledge his loss by kissing the ground before the Pharaoh.

Unfortunately, the Egyptian iconographic evidence does not provide substantive depictions of Nubian wrestling techniques. Egyptian art is highly ethnocentric and particularly derogatory toward the black wrestlers.¹⁸ The artistic evidence focuses on the theme of Egyptian prowess. 'Ibis motif is most vividly depicted in the "tribute games." The Nubian contestants form a regiment, exclusively dedicated for Pharaohic competition. Amidst the Egyptian propaganda, inflammatory boasts, spectacular moves and victory paens, there is a hint of realism: a referee.¹⁹ The referee assures observance of the rules. Other evidence will give substance to what the Egyptian iconography suggests: that ancient Nubians had a wrestling culture.

There is a later illusion to Nubian wrestling in Heliodorus' *Aithiopia*. Heliodorus, a native of Syria, probably lived in the third century A.D.²⁰

16. Ibid., Pl. 38, no. 2.

17. Ibid., Pl. 38, no. 9.

18. See R. Drenkhahn, "Darstellungen von Negern in Ägypten" (Ph.D. Diss., Hamburg, 1967); Jean Vercoutter et. al., *The Image of the Black in Western Art, I: From the Pharaohs to the Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: William Morrow, 1976); and Frank M. Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

19. If the matches were nothing more than staged nationalistic propaganda, then they would not be altogether removed from "Professional Wrestling" in twentieth-century America. Like the Egyptian-Nubian contests, Americans are continually competing against Soviets in the modern rendition of the ringed farce.

20. Heliodorus, *Aithiopia* 10. For critical commentaries on *Aithiopia*, see J. R. Morgan's "A Commentary on the Ninth and Tenth Books of the *Aithiopia* of Heliodorus" (Ph.D. Diss., Oxford University, 1978); and Gerald N. Sandy, *Heliodorus* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982). The text from *Aithiopia* 10 is also included in R. S. Robinson's *Sources For the History of Greek Athletics* (Chicago: Ares, 1984). For a more general discussion of Africa and classical literature, consult Joseph E. Harris, ed., *Africa and Africans as Seen by Classical Writers*,

Emphasizing the imaginative novelistic character of the work, classicists routinely disregard the possible historical dimension of *Aithiopica*. However, in Book 10, Heliodorus describes a wrestling match between a Greek by the name of Theagenes and a black wrestling champion. It is reasonable to grant that Heliodorus' description of an African wrestling champion is grounded in images of historical fact rather than imaginative fancy.²¹ *Aithiopica* seems to confirm an ancient African tradition of wrestling that persisted at least from the days of the New Kingdom until the late Roman Empire

Search for the Ancient Nubian Wrestlers

In order to locate the source of the ancient Nubian wrestlers, one must be able to differentiate between the various types of Nubians. Unfortunately, the classical and Egyptian sources were inattentive to descriptive ethnographies of the ancient Nubians. While the written sources neglect to include descriptive accounts of Nubians, the artists portray the foreigners with elaborate detail. It is difficult to know whether or not the Egyptian artists conceived Nubia to be ethnically compartmentalized. The search for the source of the ancient Nubian wrestlers is formidable using only ancient Egyptian evidence. A critical combination of ancient records with archaeological and modern anthropological data will help narrow the search.

The Egyptians consistently use the term "Nubian" in a collective sense, referring to all brown or black-skinned peoples to their south. There is evidence, however, that demonstrates that the black-skinned Nubians came from below the third cataract. After a series of Nubian uprisings during the Middle Kingdom, Sesostri III led an army into the Sudan and defeated the rebels. He set up a commemorative stela at Semna (37 miles south of Halfa). The famous stela warns Negroes not to pass beyond that point, unless they are on their way to market.²² There are no accompanying descriptions of the Negroes given.

Egyptian sources are mute about the southern Negroes during the time period of upheaval called the Second Intermediate Period, (1780-1551 B.C.). There is reason to believe that Sesostri III's Negro enemy is the same foe faced by Thutmose I during the New Kingdom. Thutmose I erected a victory stela celebrating his triumph over a certain people who lived below the third cataract. The inscription boasts, "He has overthrown the chief of the Nubians; the Negro is helpless. . . . There is not a remnant among the kinky-haired who came to attack him."²³ The Egyptian word translated kinky-haired is accompanied by a lock of hair as a determinative. The epithet "kinky-haired" is used synonymously with the name "Negro." The parallel construction implies that the distinctive feature about the southern Nubians, or Negroes, is their kinky-hair. This literary evidence suggests that Nubian physical types varied regionally.

Vol. II of *The William Leo Hansberry African History Notebook* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1977); and L. A. Thompson, *Africa in Classical Antiquity* (Ibadan, 1969).

21. S. Carroll, "A Note on Heliodorus Chapter Ten," (Unpublished manuscript).

22. J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906), 1:652.

23. *Ibid.*, 2:71.

Egyptian art also depicts a regional distinction in Nubian physical types.²⁴ During the Old and Middle Kingdoms, Egyptian rule extended to around the third cataract. Nubians are portrayed with skin of varying shades of darkness, distinctive dress and the facial features of an Egyptian. When the New Kingdom extended its rule south beyond the fourth cataract, there was a corresponding change in the artist's portrayal of the Nubian. The Southerners are shown with distinct Negroid features—dark skin, everted lips, prognathous jaws and kinky-hair (See Figure 10). All of the ancient Nubian wrestlers share a physiognomic similarity to the south-Nubian Negroes alluded to in the Egyptian sources.

The suggestion that the ancient Nubian wrestlers came from regions to the south of the fourth cataract seems to be confirmed by anthropological evidence.²⁵ Archaeologists examined a burial site at Gebel Moya and other hills in the Gezira of Sudan where remains date back to earlier than the twenty-fifth dynasty in Egypt. According to one of the archaeologists, "the cemeteries of this site have yielded the remains of a tall coarsely built Negro or Negroid race with extraordinarily massive skulls and jaws."²⁶ There is a strong possibility that the southern Nubians portrayed in the wrestling scenes came from this part of the Sudan. Anthropologists further suggest that the Negro type of the Gezira



Figure 10. Courtesy of the Museo Civico Archeologico. Relief Number 1887.

24. See Sylvia Hochfield and Elizabeth Riefstahl, eds., *Africa in Antiquity: The Arts of Ancient Nubia and the Sudan* (New York Brooklyn Museum Publ., 1978).

25. See S. Adam, "The Importance of Nubia: A Link Between Central Africa and the Mediterranean," in Mokhtar, ed., *UNESCO General History of Africa*, 2:242; and H. A. MacMichael, *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan*, Vol. 1 (1922; reprint ed., London: Frank Cass, 1967), pp. 20-21.

26. C. G. Seligman, "Address to the Anthropological Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science," *Report* (Manchester, 1915), p. 9. See also C. G. Seligman, "The Physical Characters of the Nuba of Kordofan," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 40 (1910); and "Some Aspects of the Hamitic Problem in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan," *ibid.*, 43 (1913): 625.

hills immigrated to the Nuba hills of southern Kordofan. The image of the tall, dark and extremely muscular Nubian is strikingly reminiscent of the Nuba of southern Kordofan in the Sudan. These people have remained sheltered in the remote hill country from outside influences and are surrounded by people that are physically and linguistically different from them.²⁷ Indeed, of the various people in the Sudan, none would seem better fit to be the descendants of the ancient Nubian wrestlers than those of the Nuba hill tribes of southern Kordofan.

Ethnographic Evidence for Nuba Wrestling

Ethnographic studies furnish ample evidence that demonstrates cultural continuity between the ancient southern Nubians and the Nuba people of southern Kordofan. The most interesting similarity is the importance placed on wrestling by the Nuba (See Figures 11 through 13). A recent anthropological survey of the Nuba noted their love for this sport, writing, "wrestling is to the Nuba what cricket is to the English. It is the one sport in which every fit man and boy takes part."²⁸ Due to Islamization, many Sudanese people abandoned their pre-Islamic cultural traditions, which may have included wrestling. Apart from the Nuba hill people in the Sudan, the only other peoples to practice organized tribal wrestling are the Nilotic Lotuko and Dinka.²⁹ Clustered in their remote southern Kordofanian hill country, a half million Nuba have practiced their tribal traditions, virtually uninterrupted for millenia. The ethnographic evidence on Nuba wrestling will underscore its cultural importance among the people and also, when used cautiously, may reflect the significance of wrestling among their ancient predecessors.³⁰

According to an oral tradition, the Nuba began wrestling in order to imitate certain species of monkeys which were abundant in the hill country. The young monkeys played by trying to overthrow each other.³¹ The Nuba wrestlers imitate

27. Most of the Nuba speak languages in the Congo-Kordofanian language stock of African languages, and are the only people in the Sudan whose languages are in this family. There are a few Nuba people living to the northwest of the Nuba hills that speak languages assigned to the Eastern Sudanic subdivision of the Chari-Nile family which is related to the Old Nubian of the Nile valley (although the earliest textual evidence of Nubian is 8 c. A.D.). Note J. Greenberg, *Languages of Africa*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1970) and Roland Oliver, "The Problem of the Bantu Expansion," *Journal of African History* 7 (1966): 861-76. Note specifically the many works on the Nuba languages included in the bibliography. A recent summary is M. Posnansky, "Introduction to the Later Prehistory of Sub-Saharan Africa," in Mokhtar, ed., *UNESCO General History of Africa*, 2:536.

28. C. Sweeney, *Jebels by Moonlight* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), p. 161.

29. See G. W. B. Huntingford, "The Northern Nilo-Hamites: East Central Africa part VI," *Ethnographic Survey of Africa*, ed. D. Forde (London: International African Institute, 1953), p. 90. Among the Lotuko, both sexes wrestle separately. This practice seems similar to puberty wrestling among the young girls of the Talodi and Lafofa in C. G. Seligman and B. Z. Seligman, *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan* (London: G. Routledge and Sons, 1932), pp. 391-92. For wrestling among other non-Nuba Sudanese peoples, note F. S. Deng, *The Dinka of the Sudan* (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), pp. 64-65; and J. W. Crowfoot, "Customs of the Rubatab," *Sudan Notes and Records* 1:2 (1918):121 (hereafter *SNR*).

30. For ethnographic accounts of Nuba wrestling, see Oskar and Horst Luz, "Proud Primitives, the Nuba People," *National Geographic* 130.5 (1966): 673-99; S. F. Nadel, *The Nuba* (London: Oxford Press, 1947); Leni Riefenstahl, *The Last of the Nuba* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1973); George Rodger, *Le Village des Noubas* Paris: Robert Delpire, 1955); J. Sagar, "Notes on the History, Religion and Customs of the Nuba," *SNR* 5.1 (1922): 137-56; Seligman and Seligman, *Pagan Tribes*; and C. Sweeney, *Jebels*.

31. C. Sweeney, *Jebels*, pp. 161-62.



Figure 11. Courtesy of Leni Riefenstahl.

certain animal and insect characteristics while wrestling. Like a baboon or monkey threatening its foe, the Nuba will rub his hands on the ground; (and it helps his grip). He stamps his feet and roars like a bull. Flicking his tongue and moving his fingers like a large flying insect, the Nuba dances into the ring, not as a man, but representing the spirit of his cattle herd.³²

The Nuba wrestling matches are quite thrilling. The spectators enthusiastically cheer for their village heroes. Oskar and Horst Luz, while studying the Nuba, wrote an exciting description of how the matches were fought:

A wrestler dances into the ring, looks challengingly around, assumes a fighting stance, elbows on his knees-and waits. Whoever accepts the summons enters the ring. . . . Now the two men take measure of each other, crouching, wary, flexing bulging biceps. To over awe the opponent, they whirl with springy steps, shake arms and shoulders, limber up, and ripple their muscles. One wrestler darts forward, taps his head, feints probingly, backs away, flicks his tongue in and out, advances again. The easy graceful movements resemble advance. The adversary springs forward, reaches down, tries to seize his opponent's legs. The two grapple, arms coiled around each other. One lifts his opponent and attempts to throw him to the ground, but the other, catlike, lands on his feet. It is only a momentary reprieve. A quick fake, a rush, another clinch, another lift-and this victim is slammed on his buttocks to the ground. Next match!³³

Every Nuba boy has the dream of one day representing his village in a wrestling match. From a young age, he competes with other village boys in his peer group.³⁴ The immediate goal is to show the necessary intelligence, character and skill to be chosen to live in the cattle camp outside of town. While exceptional boys are taken to the camp at young ages, all the boys of the village eventually go to the cattle camp by age thirteen. At the camp, the boys care for

32. L. Riefenstahl, *Last Nuba*. p. 132.

33. O. Luz and H. Luz, "Proud Primitives," p. 698.

34. The "age-grade" competition is attested to by S. F. Nadel, *Nuba*, pp. 134, 136, 231-32, 297-98, 406 297-98. 410-11.



Figure 12. Courtesy of Leni Riefenstahl.

and graze the herd. But, more importantly they go to be trained daily in the techniques of wrestling by the village champion. Their training table consists of the best food that the village can offer.³⁵ The cattle-wrestling camp is the Nuba school for young men. While at the camp, they become part of a cultic fraternity. Daily, time is spent in reflective meditation. The wrestlers take ash from burnt trees (which represents to them life's essence) and they dust their naked bodies with it, giving them power and cultic identity.³⁶ By wrestling, the young men are initiated into a manhood cult. The boys learn to work hard, be courageous and endure pain.³⁷ The wrestlers are allowed to marry under

35. L. Riefenstahl, *Last Nuba*, p. 101. Cow's milk, the largest quantities of *dura*, peanuts, sesame and honey are reserved for wrestlers. Children, pregnant women and those who are nursing we given goat's milk. Ironically, at the matches all *but* the wrestlers drink beer; and, apparently, the wrestlers also abstain from tobacco! (Ibid., p. 77).

36. Ibid., p. 101.

37. With many ancient cultures, wrestling was part of military training. The Nuba, however, are peace-loving people. S. F. Nadel, *Nuba*, p. 300; L. Riefenstahl, *Last Nuba*, p. 20. See L. Riefenstahl, *The People of the Kau*, (New York: Harper, 1976); and F. D. Kingdom, "Bracelet Fighting in the Nuba Mountains," *SNR* 21. 1 (1938): 197-99.



Figure 13. Courtesy of Leni Riefenstahl.

complicated stipulations. The Nuba believe that sexual intercourse weakens the wrestler and, therefore, it is socially and psychologically very difficult for men in their late twenties to leave the cattle camp and start families.³⁸

The wrestlers represent their village, not themselves, at tournaments. Vainglory is overshadowed by the wrestler's desire to win on behalf of their village's ancestral cult. Each individual wrestles several randomly chosen matches at a tournament. Wrestlers are free to refuse to compete against an opponent if they wish. The athlete that is first to take his opponent to the ground, wins the match.³⁹ Some wrestlers wear gourds around their waist. Unbroken gourds testify that the wrestler has not lost. But, if they are taken down, it is both embarrassing to them and painful when these gourds break against their bare buttocks.

The laurel crown for a Nuba victor is a twig, an animal hide or a fur tail. Winners are carried jubilantly on their friends' shoulders, but individual victors are forgotten quickly. Every village has its premier wrestler who is experienced and consistently successful.⁴⁰ Often the champion's reputation spreads and girls compose songs about his prowess. The following is a typical song about a champion wrestler's victories followed by his decline:

You are strong. You can throw ten men. But some time ago you weakened. You threw 2 men only, or you were sitting idle. Your cattle are strong and give plenty of milk. You have great strength. But now you dress up, you go to the village to be with the girls. Thus you can no longer throw ten men. You throw only three or sit idle. Formerly, when Kobane was here, he was stronger than you all!⁴¹

When a famous champion dies, he is commemorated with annual tournaments,

38. See L. Riefenstahl, *Last Nuba*, pp. 19, 24, 103-104; and S. F. Nadel, *Nuba*, pp. 299-300.

39. S. F. Nadel, *Nuba*, p. 232.

40. The Champion comes from a group selected and dedicated at a young age. See L. Riefenstahl, *Last Nuba*, pp. 103, 130-31; O. and Hertz Luz, "Proud Primitives," pp. 692-93.

41. S. F. Nadel, *Nuba*, pp. 136-37.

similar to the Greek funerary games.⁴² Amidst the laud and honour directed toward a hero, however, his glory is never allowed to supersede the importance of the team unit and the village that his team represents.⁴³

Wrestling tournaments are held between Nuba villages. The competition is conducted around sowing and harvest seasons. There are obvious fertility rites connected with the wrestling tournaments.⁴⁴ The challenge to competition is issued by the *Kudjur* (the leader of the village cult) and is contingent on surplus grain and beer in the host village. The wrestling is followed by banqueting and festivities. Harvest tournaments are designed for the mutual consumption of the surplus grain by the participating villages. The surplus consumption is like an offering in gratitude to the spirit-world for the plentiful harvest.⁴⁵ Wrestlers will travel as far as 20 miles to participate in a tournament.⁴⁶ Villagers fill jars with beer and set out on a journey behind their champions. The wrestling tournament is the most significant cultic and social event for the Nuba people.

Wrestling is the medium that coherently ties together the various aspects of Nuba life. The sport is important to the Nuba for both social and religious reasons. Wrestling is the Nuba way to prepare a boy for manhood while providing an opportunity for all young men to achieve. Successful wrestlers marry more advantageously and enjoy a status that will follow them to the grave. The religious implications of Nuba wrestling are more complex, containing at least three interrelated ideas. First, wrestling is closely related to ancestral worship. Second, wrestling is closely connected with fertility rites. Finally, wrestling is the channel through which the participants dramatize their animistic beliefs. Wrestling has continued to unify an otherwise dislocated and isolated people. The importance of this sport to the Nuba cannot be overestimated.

Conclusion

Concrete connections can be made between the ancient Nubians and the modern Nuba. The most conclusive evidence for a cultural continuity is derived from a comparison of the ancient archaeological evidence with modern anthropological data. Each have anthropomorphical and cultural features in common. Four striking similarities can be noted with comparing the cultural traits of the ancient Nubian wrestlers with those of the modern Nuba people. The first similarity is that both the ancient Nubians and modern Nuba participated in wrestling and stick fighting. The Nuba play a dangerous game with spears during their wrestling festivals which have been, increasingly, banned by many tribes. Second, it has been argued that the ball-like figures dangling from the

42. L. Riefenstahl, *Last Nuba*, pp. 101, 168-200. Apparently, some matches are conducted to placate the dead man's spirit; Note Seligman and Seligman, Pagan, p. 410. See also S. F. Nadel, *Nuba*, p. 297.

43. S. E. Nadel, *Nuba*, pp. 231-32.

44. See G. W. Bell, "Nuba Agricultural Methods and Beliefs," *SNR* 21.2 (1938): 337-49; L. Riefenstahl, *Last Nuba*, pp. 75-76, and C. Sweeney, Jebels, p. 161. Refer to C. G. Seligman "Religion of the Nuba" in *Hasting's Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*; P. D. Kauczor, "Afitti Nuba of Jebel Daier," *SNR* 6.1(1923): 13.

45. L. Riefenstahl, *Last Nuba*, p. 130.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

hems of the Nubian wrestlers' garments in the Amarna block are similar to the gourds that are worn around the waists of the Nuba wrestlers⁴⁷ (Compare Figures 3 and 11). Third, the Nubian wrestling battalion have tail like protusions coming from near their buttocks and animal tails bound to their legs, just under their knees. This is also similar to a modern Nuba practice of wearing bounded, weighted tails and leggings (Compare Figures 1 and 12) while they wrestle. The tails are only worn by the most superior athletes, demonstrate the wrestler's animistic beliefs and their superior skill and balance during a bout. Finally, the head of the cow in the countryside Amarna scene (Figure 3) may suggest that the ancient wrestlers were cattleman, like their modern descendants.

Evidence regarding ancient Nubian wrestling is derived from Egyptian archaeological sources and a literary reference in Heliodorus' *Aithiopica*. A careful anthropological investigation of the modern Sudanese tribes reveals a wrestling culture thriving among the Nuba of southern Kordofan. It is reasonable to think that the Egyptians subjugated wrestling tribes like the Nuba. African wrestling champions were taken from their villages and organized into a regiment to wrestle in the Pharaoh's tribute games. The ancient Nubian tradition is still practiced fervently by the Nuba, thousands of years after the glory of the Pharaohs.

47. This very important observation was made by W. Decker in "Neue Dokumente zum Ringkampf im alten Ägypten," 7-24, Dok. 2, p. 10 sqq; and idem, *Sport und Spiel im alten Ägypten*, pp. 80 ff. Ill. 45 on p. 84.