

Representations of Gymnastics in Ancient Egypt, Religious conceptions, Purpose to Sport Heritage

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Abstract

Gymnastics was one of the sport which was performed in ancient Egypt for several concepts, It was acrobatic movements have a religious conceptions which associated with goddess Hathor, It was also depicted as a ceremonial sport participated in the religious and official ceremonies, This article talks about the representations of this sport heritage.

Key words

Gymnastics, positions, religious conceptions ,ceremonial sport , heritage.

Objectives of the study

- Determining the main purposes for gymnastics as sport.
- Indicating the differences and characteristics of the Egyptian terms and expressions to describe the actions of acrobatic dance or gymnastics.
- Classifying the different gymnastic positions.

- Indicating the purpose of gymnastics in sport heritage.




Introduction


The ancient Egyptian practiced variety of sports that are still performed today, thus he was familiar with both combative sports like boxing and wrestling as well as competitive sports like running and rowing. He was also familiar with ceremonial sports like gymnastics and pole climbing.

Gymnastics is one of the world's oldest physical activities and sports and its roots can be traced back thousands of years, Gymnastics was most likely first depicted in Egyptians artifacts. The earliest known physical evidence of gymnastics can be found in the art of ancient Egypt, where female acrobats performed for the Pharaohs

and the Egyptian nobility (Brunner-Traut, 1958, p79-80).

The ancient Egyptian used some terms and expressions to describe the actions of acrobatic dance or gymnastics some actions related to dancing, which were mentioned in the captions accompanying the scenes it is mentioned in table (1) below.

term	Transliteration	Reference
	<i>ib3</i>	Wb, I,62, 8-11; 14
	<i>hbi</i>	Wb III 250, 5-13
	<i>Ksks</i>	Wb V, 141-142.3

ib3: It was a common word for dance in general with its types, it used to express the gymnastic positions from the old kingdom to the greaco- roman period with , 

hbi was a term that express bridge position in gymastics (Green, L, 1983, p37)

Ksks was a term To express the acrobatic movements performed by non Egyptians who live in the southeastern region of libya and western Nubia (Darel J.C, 1995, p70)

Gymnastic positions

Gymnastic was classified according to the performers' movements which depicted the positions of the body (Morris, E.F, 2011, p71-73)

The gymnastic positions that were depicted in the archeological evidences were the high leg kick, the bow, the arch, and the bridge position,

High leg kick:

A physical strike in which using the leg usually in conjunction with the foot and the knee or lower area

It appears in the tomb of kagemni, Mehu , and Ankhm hor . It shows some of the dancers wearing a short white kilt with a tie in the middle represented performing the high leg kick position where they kick one leg high up in front whilst throwing their bodies precariously behind them fig (1) (PM III, 621, 17; Decker,W,1994 , p779)

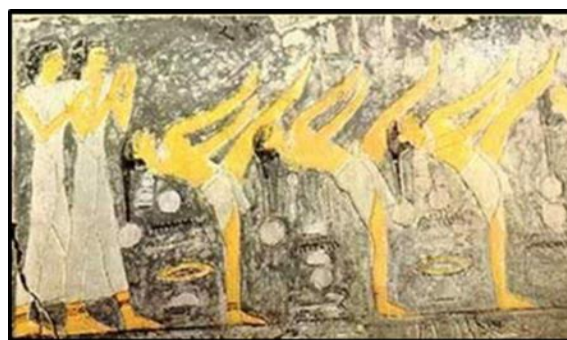


Figure (1) High leg kick position I, tomb of Mehu , Saqqara- old kingdom
After: Decker,W,1994 , Tafel ,CDXXIII, s 3.58

Bow position: Bending body with stretching by opening the chest, Bend the knees, keeping the toes active catching hold of the feet with the hands, and making the body bent like a bow. It was represented in tomb TT60 of Antefoker the vizier of king Senwsert I, where pair of acrobats are represented doing the bow position with a quiet difference as they based their hands in the floor not catching their feet with them and their feet almost touch the heads fig (2) (Davies, N.G and Gardiner, A.H, 1920, 39-40)



Figure (2) Bow position from Antefoker tomb(TT60) Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, Middle kingdom
After :Davies, N.G and Gardiner, A.H, 1920, PLXV

Arch position :

An arch is a body position, in which the back is curved backwards, the chest is open and the body takes on a convex shape. It is often used in dance movements to make them look more extended and attractive. This position appeared on the walls of tomb 18 of Wehka at Qaw el-Kebir which dates back to the reign of king Amenemhat III (middle kingdom) fig (3). A gymnastic performer is represented performing an acrobatic position which is the arch position, she is naked and her buttocks are adorned with tattoo.



Figure (3) Arch position from tomb of Wehka II (Qaw 33)- Qaw el-Kebir- Middle kingdom
After :Morris, E.F, 2011, p81, fig4

It was also depicted on the northern part of the eastern wall of the tomb of *Nb Imn* (TT65) fig (4) where a group of gymnasts were represented practicing some acrobatic movements. A gymnast appears alone in the arch position, where she rests on her hands while raising her whole body upwards taking the convex shape as if she is flying in the air in front of a group of gymnasts in a state of readiness to do the same movement, led by a pair performing the bridge (Decker, w, 1994, p718-719; PM I, 130, 65.6)

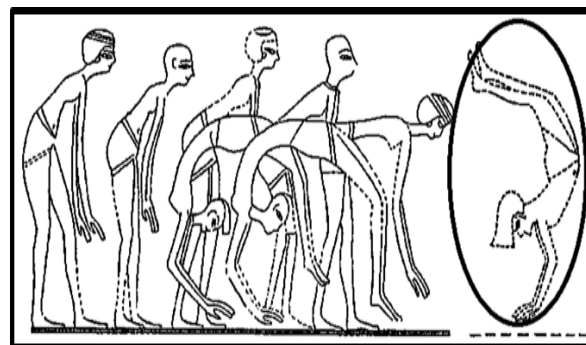


Figure (4) arch and bridge positions from tomb of Nb Imn (TT 65) Sheikh Abd el-Qurna.
After: Decker.W, 1994, tafel CDII, R3, 28

Bridge position : The most commonly position of gymnastics, raising the body by bending the body backward and simultaneously stretching the arms backward. The balancing of the body on the hands and the feet. It is intended to improve lower back and gluteus strength. (Lopez. R, 2002, pp83-84) The oldest depictions of the 'bridge' position, dates back to the Middle Kingdom, come from Beni Hasan represented in the tombs of Khnumhotep III , Baqet III and Khety fig (5). A pair of female acrobats performing the bridge position together, Both legs are closed together, with knees bent ,the feet of the figure are placed flat on the floor appear fixed on the ground while the upper body rises in a state of bending, resting on their hands and their feet looking upwards in a state of stability.

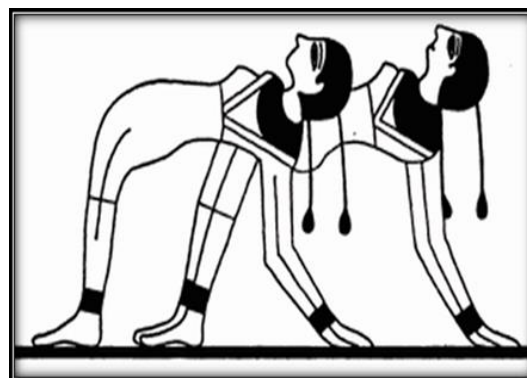


Fig (5) Bridge position from tomb of Baqet III (BH15)- Beni Hassan – Middle Kingdom
After: Decker, W,1994, tafel CCXC, R.3.5

The bridge hold is a static variation of the bridge exercise that involves getting into the full bridge, the holding in this position, either for time or until exhaustion, it was represented in a limestone statuette fig (6) dates back to the middle kingdom, preserved now in Brooklyn museum.



Figure (6) Bridge hold position – Middle Kingdom
Brooklyn museum

<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/3083>

Bridge position continued to be represented in the new kingdom fig (7), but the acrobats were more professional than those of the Middle Kingdom. the movements performed in this period are very similar to the movements of current gymnastics.

A colored limestone ostraca (no C 7052) dates back to the 19th dynasty, represents a gymnastic performer doing the bridge position. The angle formed by her left knee and right elbow meeting on the other side can be seen by resting only the tips of her fingers and hands on the ground. The line separating the arms from the abdomen is broken by the chest, which extends from the head. The thick, curly black hair that appears to pull the head towards the ground contrasts sharply with the limbs' thinness.(Guillemette A ,2013, p. 25)



Figure (7) a gymnast performs a bridge position – New kingdom



Turin museum

https://collezioni.museoegizio.it/IT/material/Cat_7052/?description=&inventoryNumber=7052&title=&cgt=&yearFrom=&yearTo=&materials=&provenance=&acquisition=&epoch=&dynasty=&pharaoh

The Religious Conceptions of Gymnastics In Ancient Egypt

The ancient Egyptian uses the physical movements of gymnastics in order to please their divinities and get closer to them.

Goddess Hathor the goddess of joy and entertainment was associated with gymnastics as a type of dance which depended on the physical practicing, Hathor was entitled with some titles related to this kind of sport such as

 *hnwt ksks*,  (Brunner-Traut, 1958, p 80) and *nb(t) ksks*(LGG, IV, 151) which mean (**she is the lady of ksks movements**)

some gymnastics positions were dramatic acting for religious myths belonging to Hathor.

According to her role in the legend of the Horus and Seth conflict, a New Kingdom short myth about the dispute between those two gods, Ra is upset after being insulted by another god, Babi, and lied on his back alone. After some time, Hathor exposed her genitals as a joke to Ra, making him laugh and got up again to perform his duties as ruler(Pinch, G, 2002, p138)

this was firstly mentioned in the texts recorded in the Kagmeni tomb fig(8) as the captions written above the heads of the performers of high leg kick (Decker,w,1994, p778-779; PM III, p522-523)



Figure (8) The Xnr perform the high leg kick - mastaba of kagmni – Saqqara – Old Kingdom
After : Decker,w,1992, 144, Abb 98

that performer was called the *hnr* they were represented doing high leg kick with caption *mk sšt3 hnr(w)t*" (look the *hnr* 's secret) as a role play of Hathor, this caption might be associated with her title as **mistress of vulva** (Kinny, L, 2008, p166). this position was also represented in the mastaba of vizir Ankh M Khrw at Saqqara which dates back to the 6th dynasty fig (9). a group of performers do the high leg kick with caption *ib3* means to dance(PM III, 165.13-16).

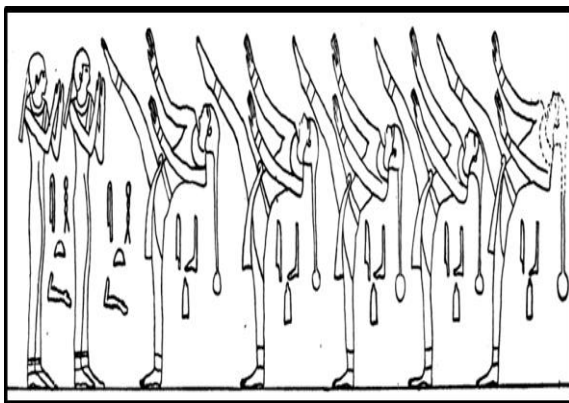


Figure (9)The xnr perform the high leg kick - mastaba of Ankh M Khrw- Old Kingdom
After: Erika.M,D,2009, fig4

So the representations of the high leg kick position especially was considered an activation of the powers of Hathor, where the deceased is depicted in the form of a statue or on a scene that can be revived, like Ra.

According to her myth of the return eye of re, Ra sent Hathor as the Eye of Ra to punish humans for plotting rebellion against his rule. She became the lioness goddess Sekhmet and massacred the rebellious humans, but Ra decided to prevent her from killing all humanity. He ordered that beer be dyed red and poured out over the land. Hathor drank the beer, mistaking it for blood, and in her inebriated state reverts to being the benign and beautiful Hathor. Beer , and the *ksks* dance especially the bridge position which was performed by the Nubian , and Libyan were as calming methods and votive offerings to Hathor ,As this position represented the union of Hathor with the god Re(Bocquillon,I,2001,201-203).

It was mentioned in the middle kingdom but became well known in the Greco-Roman period as a texts from the kiosk of Medamud mentioned that the non – Egyptians performers perform the *ksks* for Hathor. Also Inscriptions from Dendera indicate that all those who attended the temple during the celebrations were practicing the acrobatic *ksks* from the 1st day the 4th day of *thy* month(Brown , G.2010, pp166-169)

It was not only limited to priestesses during the celebration period, As the aim of this performance was to please the goddess, and to reach a state of religious ecstasy, as if they were interacting with the divine world.

Gymnastics as a ceremonial sport

Gymnastics with its movements were practiced as ceremonial sport in religious and official ceremonies from the Old and Middle

Kingdom represented on the walls of tombs. For example, the representation of gymnastics performers in tomb of int f ikr fig (2) was part of the harvest celebration which took place during the spring. This celebration included music, dance, and acrobatic movement (gymnastics) (Davies, N.G and Gardiner, A.H, 1920, 39-40)

During the new kingdom gymnastics occupied an important aspect in temple celebrations. Gymnastic movements and acrobatics reached its maturity and completeness aspect. As it combined the lofty and powerful performance of the dancers of the Old Kingdom with the vitality and flexibility of the dancers of the Middle Kingdom. Thus, acrobatic dance, like other physical sports, became more professional. It was among the ceremonial sports in official festivals such as the Beautiful Valley Festival and the Opet Festival, as well as the *sd* Festival, where gymnastics performers appeared performing on the *sd* Festival of King Amenhotep III.

Gymnasts took place in the procession of Amun in the beautiful valley festival, The procession would be led by Amun in his bark from the East as a symbol of rising sun, new life, the direction of the living to the West as a symbol of setting sun, land of the dead. The procession proceeded to the Temple of Million Years of the King where the townspeople would sacrifice food and drink as well as flowers to the flotilla of boats. It was represented in one of the scenes in the first floor of Hatshepsut temple at el Deir el Bahari fig (10) as a group of gymnasts performances performing the bridge position during the festival of the beautiful valley (Spalinger.A, 1993, p289-303)



Figure (10) gymansts perform the bridge position - Deir el Bahari – New Kindom

After: Decker,w, 1994, Tafel CCCXCIII, R 3.15

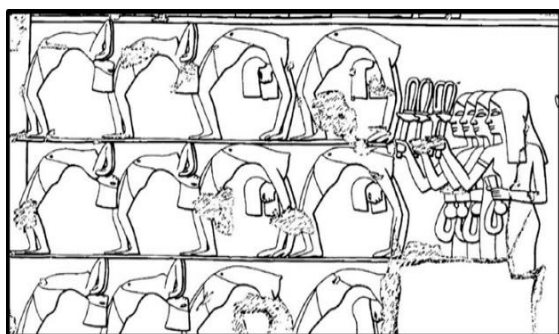
The previous scene at Deir el-Bahari shows the moment of the procession arrival, while the next scene fig (11) depicted in the walls of the Red chapel of Hatshepsut shows the returning procession from the western bank,



Figure (11) Bridge position in the red chapel – open air museum – karnak New kingdom

After: Decker, W, 1994, Tafel, CCCXIV, R.3.16

A group of performers , men and women, appeared carrying the sistrum, while there are two rows of gymnasts each row with three, appear in the upper part of the scene performing the bridge position. It was also represented on the western wall of the hypostyle hall scenes of Luxor temple as a part of opet festival celebration fig (12) three rows of gymnasts naked from above and wearing a short kilt performed the bridge position in the presence of priestesses holding the sistrum and menat,(PM II, 314, 77-81)



**Figure (12) Gymnasts perform bridge position in opet celebration – luxor temple
New kingdom
After: Spencer, P, 2003, p11**

Gymnastics In sport Heritage

Egypt was the starting point for gymnastics in the ancient world, and after that it was practiced and developed by other countries, the most important of which was Greece. The Greeks were very interested in gymnastics, and considered it a necessity in raising their children in addition to science and education. It was elevated by the Greeks and they considered it a kind of fine arts, such as music, artworks such as painting and sculpture (Morgan. E , 2017, p8),

The practice of gymnastics declined in the Middle Ages until the Renaissance due to the emergence of the Christianity, which made them refrain from attending acrobatic shows and fighting games that used to end in the death of one of them.

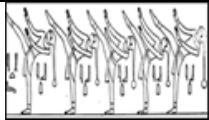







The people of the ancient world practiced gymnastics in order to improve the physical abilities of soldiers in preparation for wars, as well as for entertainment, The reason behind the interest of the Romans in gymnastics as a physical sport is that the Greeks invaded them, and they noticed that the Greeks relied on gymnastic exercises in the training of their soldiers, which contributed to the formation of a strong physical structure for their soldiers. (Matsaridis, A, 2011, p340-341)

It is worth noting that the Romans were the first to use wooden horses in their training to

jump and land on the device, and the wooden horse was very similar to the real horse and had a head and a tail.

In the Renaissance era, Europe had the lead and leadership in interest in sports and organized physical activity, and in this era the features and characteristics of gymnastics became clear as a physical art. The German Johann Christoph Friedrich GutsMuths, is considered the great grandfather of gymnastics. In 1793 he published a textbook which was later translated to English as “Gymnastics for Youth he also has a great credit for gymnastics, whose training he included in his school programs in 1776 (Morgan. E , 2017, p10). In 1881, Gymnastics became an “organized sport” when the Bureau of the European Gymnastics Federation, which would later become the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG,) was formed. Although the developments that were occurred to this sport, ancient Egyptians were the first who set the basic regulations of this sport.

The table (2) shows the basic positions of gymnastics sport which dating back to ancient Egypt and what 's parallel to them in modern time

pose	Ancient Egyptian Representations	Physical representations (Modern time)
High leg kick		
Bow		
Bridge		
Arch		

Gymnastics began to take its place in Egypt in the modern era in **1918** when it was accepted as a school sport by the Ministry of Public Education's Sports Department before being expanded to be included the Egyptian Universities. The Egyptian gymnastics participated for the first time in the Olympic Games in Antwerp in 1920, As The first two performers were Ahmed Tabouzadeh and Qabil Mahmoud. Egypt established The Egyptian Gymnastics Federation in 1934 then It was re-established in **1942** and joined the International Federation in 1946.

In **1950** Egypt participated for the first time in the World Championships in Switzerland. The most remarkable co- operation to Egypt in Olympiad was in the 2000 Sydney Games when the Alexandrian Sherine Tohme win as The first Egyptian Olympic gymnast, Also Egypt succeeded in hosting the 2022 Gymnastics World Cup with Participation of 281 participants representing 34 countries.

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