BULL-LEAPING

Modern sport hints at an ancient tradition

For the complete media with media resources, visit: http://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/bull-leaping/

Ethnoarchaeology is the study of a present-day culture to help understand the distant past. The modern sport of course Landaise offers ethnoarchaeologists hints about the ancient Greek practice of bull-leaping. (Bull-leaping is exactly what it sounds like: People jumping over bulls.)

The most famous image of bull-leaping is probably the Bull-Leaping Fresco from the palace at Knossos, Crete, Greece. The fresco was painted around 1400 BCE, and depicts a young man performing what appears to be a handspring or flip over a charging bull. Two young women flank the bull. (We know the sexes of the stylized figures by the way they are painted—women’s skin is usually much lighter than men’s in ancient Greek art.)

Archaeologists and anthropologists have studied the Bull-Leaping Fresco for centuries. Many say that this form of bull-leaping is purely decorative or metaphorical. Some scholars say the fresco represents a cultural or religious event, and not a display of athletic skill. Others disagree, suggesting a series of maneuvers—including using the bull’s horns for leverage—would propel an athlete over a bull’s back as shown in the fresco.

Course Landaise is a modern sport of bull-leaping. (Unlike its sister sport, bullfighting, the animal is not harmed in course Landaise.) It is mostly practiced in southwestern France and northern Spain.
Although there are significant differences, *course Landaise* offers ethnoarchaeologists possible hints at understanding the action depicted in the Bull-Leaping Fresco.

**Similarities:**
- Athletes in *course Landaise* compete as a *cuadrilla*, or team, as in the Bull-Leaping Fresco.
- *Sauteurs*, or leapers, are usually young men, as is the leaper in the fresco.
- In both instances, *sauteurs* leap directly over a charging bull.

**Differences:**
- *Sauteurs* do not quite handspring over the bull, as the athlete in the fresco does. They do, however, perform different sorts of flips (watch videos in the For Further Exploration tab to see *sauteurs* in action.)
- The animals used in *course Landaise* are usually cows, not bulls.

Ethnoarchaeologists and anthropologists must consider similarities and differences like these when evaluating the relationship between a modern culture and an ancient practice. Not all similarities and differences are weighed equally. For instance, for ethnoarchaeologists studying the relationship between ancient bull-leaping and *course Landaise*, the fact that ancient and modern athletes jump over a charging bull is probably of more importance than the fact that the athletes are usually male. Ethnoarchaeologists are consistently estimating (and re-estimating) the relative importance of facts like this.

*Course Landaise* is not the only modern sport that ethnoarchaeologists may evaluate when studying ancient cultures. Consult the “Questions” tab for other examples, and have students help determine what similarities and differences may be meaningful to study.

**Questions**

- The modern sport of basketball shares many similarities with ancient Mesoamerican “ball games.” What are some similarities and differences
between the two sports that anthropologists may want to investigate to better understand ancient Mesoamerican culture?

*Answers will vary!* Consult information about [basketball](#) and [Mesoamerican ball games](#) for help.

Some similarities:

- Both games involve two teams.
- Both games involve a rubber ball.
- Both games are played on a roughly rectangular court.

Some differences:

- Mesoamerican athletes usually kept the ball in play using their hips and torsos, while basketball players use their hands.
- The Mesoamerican ball was solid rubber, weighing as much as 4 kilograms (9 pounds), while basketballs only weigh 624 grams (22 ounces).
- The Mesoamerican hoop (a late addition to the game) was vertical, while basketball hoops are horizontal.

- Modern sprints (short foot races) share many similarities with ancient Greek foot races. What are some similarities and differences between modern and ancient sprints that anthropologists may want to investigate to better understand ancient Greek culture?

*Answers will vary!* Consult information about [sprints](#) and [ancient Greek foot races](#) for help.

Some similarities:

- Sprinting distances were remarkably similar—the ancient *stadion* (about 180 meters) is only 20 meters short of the 200-meter dash.
- No equipment is used in either race.
- Sprints have been a part of all ancient and modern Olympic Games.
Some differences:

- Only men competed in official foot races in ancient Greece, while women compete in modern sprints. (The sexes do not, however, compete against each other.)
- Ancient athletes raced along a rectangular field, while modern athletes compete on an oval track.
- Ancient runners usually competed in the nude, while modern athletes wear specialized running gear.

- The modern sport of polo has its origins in ancient Persia, where it was sometimes called *chogan*. What are some similarities and differences between polo and *chogan* that anthropologists may want to investigate to better understand ancient Persian culture?

*Answers will vary!* Consult information about **polo** and **chogan** for help.

Some similarities:

- Both sports feature two teams of athletes on horseback.
- Teams use long mallets to hit a ball into a goal on either end of a rectangular field.
- Male and female athletes both compete in tournaments.

Some differences:

- Modern polo teams have four players, while *chogan* teams often had twice as many.
- The balls used in *chogan* were usually made of wood or bamboo, while today's polo balls are made of hard plastic.
- Modern polo players must hold their mallets in their right hand only. This is a safety rule that did not apply to ancient athletes.

**Fast Facts**

4 of 6
• *Vaches Landaises*, the cows used in *course Landaise*, are slightly smaller than most other cows. They weight about 300-500 kilograms (660-1,102 pounds) and stand about 1.25 meters (4 feet).

• Depictions of ancient bull-leaping have been found throughout the Mediterranean basin, including Egypt and Syria, and as far east as the Indus Valley.

• *Jallikattu* is a modern ritual sport of bull-taming, practiced in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. *Jallikattu* shares many similarities with *course Landaise*, including team competition, but leaping is not one of them.

### Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Part of Speech</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>anthropologist</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>person who studies cultures and characteristics of communities and civilizations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>archaeologist</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>person who studies artifacts and lifestyles of ancient cultures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>culture</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>learned behavior of people, including their languages, belief systems, social structures, institutions, and material goods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ethnoarchaeologist</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>person who studies how people today use and organize objects in order to understand how they used and organized objects in the past.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flank</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>to be or place at the side of something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fresco</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>art or design painted directly into the wet plaster of a wall or other surface.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maneuver</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>a skillful movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metaphor</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>word or phrase used to represent something else, or an understanding of one concept in terms of another concept.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Articles & Profiles

- Expedition: Bulls and Bull-leaping in the Minoan World

Books

- Arthur Evans: The Palace of Minos—“The Taureador Frescoes”

Video

- Diagonal View: Guy Jumps Over a Bull
- BBC: Bull Jumping—Inside the Human Body

Websites

- Federation Francaise de la Course Landaise

© 1996–2017 National Geographic Society. All rights reserved.