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 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—that 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, *sauterus* leap directly over a charging bull.

Differences:
- *Sauterus* 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 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.

**Fast Facts**

- *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>
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<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>organize objects in order to understand how they used and organized objects in the past.</td>
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<tr>
<td>flank</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>to be or place at the side of something.</td>
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<tr>
<td>fresco</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>art or design painted directly into the wet plaster of a wall or other surface.</td>
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<tr>
<td>maneuver</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>a skillful movement.</td>
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<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>
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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

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