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Sport Pictures - Their Meaning for Sport Historians

(Lecture, presented in English at the XIth Internat. CESH-Congress in Vienna, 18th Sept. 2006;

actualised; cf. the German version: <.../VortragWien2006Deutsch.pdf>)

(The [web-links](#) refer to the addresses <www.claustiedemann.de/> <www.sport-geschichte.de/> and <www.kulturwiss.info/>; the documents to be found in the respective sub-directories <.../tiedemann/documents/>.)

My lecture is to deal with sport pictures, i. e. with pictures, the topic of which is sport (and movement culture). I've expressed my understanding of „sport“ often, among other opportunities 2004 at the CESH-Congress in Crotone and 2005 at the ISHPES-Congress in Köln¹; besides this, I've put it on the internet for discussion since 2002. Therefore, I want to introduce my sport-concept without nearer reason:

„Sport“ is a cultural field of activity in which people voluntarily enter into a relationship with other people in order to compare their respective abilities and skills in the art of movement - according to self-imposed or adopted rules and on the basis of socially accepted ethical values.²

Since this sport-definition does not include everything, which is called „sport“ colloquially, and since I regard this wider realm also worth to be object of sport-science, I need another concept, that includes besides the field of activity, called „sport“, the broader field of activity; this I call „movement culture“, defined as follows:

„Movement culture“ is a field of activity in which people deal with their nature and environment and consciously and intentionally develop, shape and present their in particular physical abilities and skills, in order to experience an individual or shared gain and enjoyment that is significant for them.³

According to this concepts, I will now look at and examine sport-pictures. So what I briefly call „sport-pictures“, are pictures relating to sport and movement culture. Now, I only must define what I understand by „pictures“:

¹ 2004 in Crotone, the theme of my lecture was „Sport (and culture of human motion) for historians“: <.../VortragCrotone2004Englisch.pdf>; 2005 in Köln, I presented „What is the object of sport science?“: <.../VortragISHPES2005.pdf> (in German).

² This is my actual definition; see (with explanations): <.../sportdefinitionEnglish.html> or <.../DefinitionSportEnglish.pdf>. 2006, my definition was: „Sport“ is a cultural field of activity, in which human beings voluntarily go into a real or only imagined relation to other people with the conscious intention to develop their abilities and accomplishments particularly in the area of skilled motion and to compare themselves with these other people according to rules put self or adopted without intending to damage them or themselves.

³ This is my actual definition; see (with explanations): <.../DefinitionMovementCulture.pdf> 2006, my definition was: „Culture of human motion“ is a field of activity, in which people come to terms with their nature and environment and consciously develop, form and represent their particularly physical abilities and accomplishments for to experience a meaningful individual or also common benefit and pleasure.

„**Pictures**“ for me (here) are all visible cultural products showing things or living beings, e. g. drawings, paintings, photographs.

By this, I want to delimit at once this concept of „picture“ from the broader idea of „picture“, which (especially the German “Bild”) covers also mental images, ideas. And here, I do not mean such pictures, that are objects of artificial consideration in today’s „art“ business either⁴, but simply any drawings, paintings, photographs.

In this lecture I’m interested in pictures showing people doing sports or an activity of movement culture. As a sport historian, I am particularly interested in knowing which value pictures do have as sources for sport-historical examinations and representations. And for the sake of conceptual clarity I am also interested in knowing whether the activity shown has to be assigned to „sport“ or to „movement culture“.⁵

Sport-pictures are used in many sport-historic publications, mostly only as illustrations, as adorning accessories. They often have only little reference to the text, if at all. This is an opportunity thrown away for sport-historians; because after a thorough examination of the pictures many an interesting information can be won, that does not come out from other source-types (especially texts).

There are some publications methodologically oriented to the question, how historians can examine pictures critically and thoroughly, how the picture,s value as a source can be opened up. I’ll name here only summarily as general historians Heike Talkenberger (1998), Peter Burke (2001 resp. 2003) and Bernd Roeck (2004) as well as particularly the sport-historians John Bale (2002) and Douglas Booth (2005).⁶

Like the mentioned authors I regard it possible and desirable to make better use than before of pictorial sources for the historical research. Even the estimable sport-historian Hajo Bernett in his book „Leichtathletik in historischen Bilddokumenten“ („Track and Field Athletics in Historical Pictorial Documents“) has not taken into account all methodological principles yet, to say nothing of other German authors like Diem, Eichel et al., Ueberhorst or Umminger in their sport-historical overview representations.

In a severe rush I would like to show through all epochs of cultural history the difficulty of using pictures with sports or movement culture as contents for sport-historical examinations and representations.

⁴ I refer to my discussions about „art“ („Kunst“) with a suggested definition: <.../kunstdefinition.html> and <.../Definition-Kunst.pdf> and <.../Kunst-Texte.pdf> (in German), and <.../art-definitionEnglish.html><.../Art-DefinitionEnglish.pdf>

⁵ Some considerations to the topic „picture and reality“ („Bild und Wirklichkeit“) I presented already 2003 in Hamburg: <.../VortragBild-Wirklichkeit2003.pdf>. 2016, I presented a lecture “Works of Fine Arts as Sources for Sport-Historical Research”: <.../VortragLudwigsburg2016.pdf>

⁶ See the complete information concerning authors and titles at the end!

In the so-called prehistory, I start with a picture that was resplendent on the cover of the German periodical „Leibeserziehung“ („physical education“) since 1951. It is about a rock-painting from the stone age, found in South Africa, reproduced at Diem and Umminger.⁷



The caption „running people“ may just be coherent in its generality, but with similarly good reasons one also could say it is „running hunters“ (because of the bows) or even „warriors“ (because of the bows and shields). You already see at this example, how unsafe such ascriptions are with today's wording. And primarily I wonder at this picture, what the scene shown could or should have to do with sport or movement culture. Following my definitions, the portrayed is quite clearly no sport activity for me. Whether it's a movement-cultural activity, is not still clear to me. Here a more precise examination would have to be employed, and the results of this examination would have to be put to discussion among sport-historians. Such examinations can of course lead to different opinions, but the scientific community then can at least exchange about them with arguments.

So it's not sufficient to place an interpretation in words under a printed picture - without any reference. Exactly that is, however, unfortunately usual - not only in the sport history. Then, an opinion is simply in the room, and the viewer doesn't receive any arguments in favour or against such interpretations, unless he takes the effort to inspect all attainable findings about the respective picture critically and to form his own opinion from this.

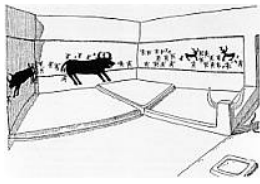
In this lecture, I don't want to give the impression, that I would have already a well-founded opinion to this picture and to all following ones. I am only in such a stage, that at most sport pictures I can express doubt about some of the accompanying text identifications method-critically. This is a necessary, but by no means adequate stage, which is not even achieved in most sport-historic publications. In those individual cases, in which I already have a well-founded opinion of my own, I shall present it in the following passage through the epochs of cultural history.

The following sport-pictures are from Çatal Hüyük (Turkey), they are almost 8000 years old and are interpreted differently. For the sport-historians Eichel and Olivová as well as for the art-historians Honour/Fleming the figures are dancing hunters. Sport-historian Umminger calls the figure shown „bow-bearing hunter“, and the historian Palmqvist interprets the scene as „red deer hunt“.⁸ This correct hunting



⁷ Diem, vol. I, after p. 112; Umminger, p. 7; cf. also Eichel, vol. I, p. 14.

⁸ Eichel et al., vol. I, p. 19; Olivová, p. 19; Honour/Fleming, p. 40; Palmqvist (2000), p. 29; Umminger, p. 6 (not shown).



context gets only clear, though, if one looks at Mellaart's reconstruction drawing of the whole room.

Again, I also wonder what all this has to do with „sport“. Since all pictures in the house A III 1, following Klotz, have to do with hunt⁹, for me they have to do nothing at all with neither „sport“ nor with „movement culture“. Only an - after my state of knowledge uncertain, but discussion worthy - interpretation as a ritualistic dance would justify their reproduction in a work of sport-history for me.

At the following example from the late antiquity, I am on rather safe ground.¹⁰ This mosaic from the villa Casale near Piazza Armerina on Sicily is very often represented and interpreted as a proof, that „female Romans“ also would have done „sports“; yes, there were a „pentathlon for women“ portrayed here.¹¹ Even after the convincing picture-analysis of Martin Dolch, Jean-Paul Thuillier as the author of a quite deserving book „Sport in the Ancient Rome“ adhered to the old pentathlon-interpretation.¹²



Dolch interpreted this mosaic as an educationally meant example for the „dietetic exercises“, that a young girl, presumably the daughter of the distinguished head of the household, always should have before eyes in her room, as an incentive to do something for her health (and physical grace).¹³ So for me it's no sport picture, but a movement-cultural one.

Many sport-historians assume that the surviving images from a bygone era reflect reality as it was, at most a little idealised. Wolfgang Decker, a representative of this „reality hypothesis“, in his book „Sport in Greek Antiquity“ wrote about the Panathenaic price amphorae:

„Among them are copies with sport-representations, whose beauty and excellence of the subject satisfy highest claims. ... There are artists at work with good knowledge of sport, permanently having the opportunity to study their topics as well-informed spectators in the municipal life of Athens. One may generalise this without hesitation for the entire area of sport and art in Greece.“¹⁴

I want to make the doubtfulness of this statement¹⁵, which was probably exaggerated out of enthusiasm, clear to you immediately with 2 running scenes of Panathenaic price amphorae as well as two further illustrations:

⁹ Klotz, p. 32/33 et al.

¹⁰ In my lecture „Bild und Wirklichkeit“ („picture and reality“), I examined this mosaic more extensively: <.../VortragBild-Wirklichkeit2003.pdf> and <.../VortragBild-Wirklichkeit2003Langfassung.pdf>.

¹¹ E. g. Kyrkos, p. 279; Lee (1984), p. 58.

¹² Thuillier, p. 89 and 144/145.

¹³ Dolch, p. 169.

¹⁴ Decker, p. 194; translated by me, C.T.

¹⁵ Cf. Bentz, p. 86.

Do you notice something at the running style of the shown people? --- Except for one person, all run like nobody does or did: they run ambling¹⁶. In most ancient pictures, the runners are represented this not realistic way. It was apparently chosen for traditional and aesthetic reasons of the ancient artists, by the way, already in the Egyptian culture.



The reality-hypothesis is doubtful in principle. 1999, Ulrich Sinn in his review of a dissertation about the ancient Greek long jump put it thus: „Unfortunately this thought doesn't work. It's really a characteristic of Greek painting art that any attempt is foreign to it to capture the reality genuinely in the representations.“¹⁷ Sinn formulated this even sharper in 1996: „We therefore must accept, that we can take hardly anything from the ancient picture world of sport about the carrying out of the sports.“¹⁸

My conviction is not quite so pessimistic. I think that we sport-historians can really draw some cognition out of a thorough analysis of sport-pictures. But Sinn is right when rejecting a naive reality-hypothesis.

By another four ancient pictures of the long jump, I want to clarify this. It is obvious for me, that the respective posture of the portrayed men, especially their handling of the „halteres“, corresponds more to aesthetic points of view than to the real motion. Above all the two pictures on the left in the round format of the inner medallion of a drinking bowl (kylix) show rather unrealistic attitudes. The two other illustrations to me seem owed to the re-



spective format, too: the jumper right above could be shown more vertically on the wider edge of an amphora than this one right below on the narrower outside-edge of the kylix, who is probably represented so bent, because otherwise there could not much be seen of him if the kylix stands or is held vertically. By the way, all portrayed activities of course for me count to „sport“ in accordance with my concept.



As a medieval sport-picture I show you an illustration from the Manesse handwriting. Also here, quite clearly, it's about sport for me, a match in stoneput with competition, rules and measuring of the result.¹⁹ Stoneput is

¹⁶ When going or running ambling, arms and feet of each side both are moved forward resp. backwards; with each step, the torso must turn as a whole; hip and shoulder turn parallelly. When walking or running „naturally“, arms and feet of each side are moved against each other; with each step, hip and shoulder screw against each other.

¹⁷ Sinn (1999), p. 76; translated by me, C.T.

¹⁸ Sinn (1996), p. 155; translated by me, C.T.

¹⁹ Cf. Walther (1988), p. 80/81.

by the way mentioned already in the Nibelungen-epos as second discipline of the bride agon (besides javelin throwing and long jump), that Gunther had to deliver with his courting of Brunhilde (and won only with Siegfried's help).²⁰ From late-medieval times, there are still many pictures about this „sport“ popular with aristocracy and „common“ people.²¹



Also only shortly, I'll present a picture from the middle of the 18th century,



showing members of the salt workers guild boating and pushing each other with a kind of spear on the Saale river at Halle (Germany)²², in which the borders between movement culture and sport are not clear for me. In every case I can assign the portrayed to movement culture; for my narrow sport-concept some elements seem to be missing: that some people jump additionally into the Saale river from the pier of the bridge, for

example, does not fit directly to the competition on the punts - certainly taken not quite so seriously indeed - at most as happily, mischievously disturbing the event out of the water. By the way, with astonishment I see also a woman in a red dress between the „pushers“.

I want to use the little time remaining to look at a well-known photo, that has got a world-wide dissemination and can be found reproduced in many sport-historical publications: a Watussi (today, we call these people Tutsi) jumping over a cord highly above the heads of two Germans in August 1907 in Njansa, at the „court“ of the leader of all inhabitants of Rwanda.

Until recently, all sport-historians adopted the „informations“ without testing, which the expedition leader Mecklenburg has given in his report on this event²³, from Diem over Ulf as far as to Bernett. They declared 2,50 m uncritically as jump height. The first, who had doubts about it - with comprehensible arguments -, was Peter Rummelt. He, also with help of technical certificates, came to the result, that the height cleared might have been „only“ approximately 2,16 m. This would be an only small diminution of the still extremely astonishing performance, compared for example with



Springer über 2,50 m. Höhe.

²⁰ Der Nibelunge Not VII, 462 - 465.

²¹ e.g. Diem (19713), vol. I, before p. 449, p. 557, p. 563; Ueberhorst (1980), p. 121, 123; Kühnst (1996), p. 38; Umminger (2000), p. 57.

²² Piechocki (1981), p. 138.

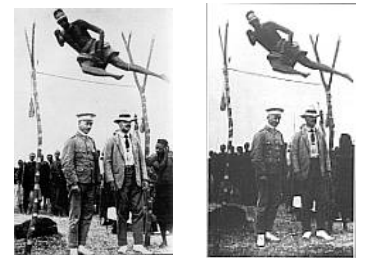
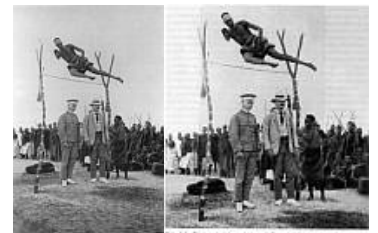
²³ Mecklenburg (ca. 1909), p. 102 - 126, esp. p. 113; the discussed photograph is printed on p. 115.

the performance of the gold medallist in the high-jump 1904 in St. Louis, who cleared 1,80 m.²⁴ In London 1908, the olympic winner cleared 1,905 m.²⁵

The newer interpretations of Aimable Ndejuru, a sport scientist from Rwanda, as well as of John Bale and Douglas Booth go more into the cultural background of the event shown, and above all Bale examined the snapshot according to (almost) all rules of the art. It becomes clear through it that even a photograph, to which one naively grants authenticity, first must be scrutinised, „read“ critically, if one wants to understand all meanings contained in it and transported with it.

This photograph, after Bale, is at first glance („*prima facie*“) a testimony of a European, colonialist sight on the „natives“, who have got some physical abilities or skills in their uncivilisedness (or „wildness“), that appear highly surprising and thus documentation worthy to the „civilised“ colonial sirs.

I still would like to add a small aspect to Bale's thorough analysis: On the „original“ photograph, that I scanned from Mecklenburg's travel report of 1909, a small sign of initials is to be seen below right, which unfortunately has been lost resp. ignored at all reproductions known to me in publications of sport-historical importance by change of the figure clipping, even at Bale's reproduction. Here you see a small selection of different published photos.



The retoucher placed it into the photo, as it was usual in that



times. This was an honest testimonial for this, that the photographs, which in this case had to get through a still long trip as exposed, but not yet developed glass plates, at the then state of technology were „refinished“ a little before the printing.

Of course this generally implies reductions to the authenticity. By the way, Bale did point to it. At that time, the professionals handled it at least openly and honestly, and therefore this sign of the retoucher should not be cut away at reproductions. In view of the present-day possibilities of digital picture manipulation (of which for the presented foils I, too, partly made use), this however still seems harmless.

Finally, I want to deal with the conceptual problem once again: What we see on Mecklenburg's photograph, for me is quite clearly not „sport“ but „movement culture“. The young male Tutsi, at least their elite, were trained intensively in different physical and mental abilities and skills, among others in archery, throwing the javelin and jumping high, but also for

²⁴ Umminger (2000), p. 193.

²⁵ Umminger (2000), p. 213.

example in fast talk and reply.²⁶ They exercised (and showed) their warlike abilities in a choral form, which appeared to the colonialists as a „dance“.

They practised the ability documented by this photograph, to jump at least their own not inconsiderable height²⁷ (as adults allegedly by 2 m on average), merely because its proof was a part of the transition rite, with which they won the recognition of the community as an adult man. About this ability, extremely astonishing to Europeans, they didn't make a lot of fuss outside this rite; they made no athletic competition out of it, neither among each other nor with somebody else so ever. They just learned and were able to do it, and they even demonstrated it for hospitality when requested by the colonialists, but not more.

That's the essential core of the „statement“ of this photograph for me; so I've „read“ this alleged sport-picture. And by this also a part of identity formation is captured here in this very picture.

Pictures: verification of origin, and captions:

- pict. 01: origin: Diem: *Weltgeschichte*, pict. 85, behind p. 112.
caption: none
- pict. 02: origin: Eichel u.a.: *Illustrierte Geschichte*, pict. 28, p. 19.
caption: none
- pict. 03: origin: Olivová: *Sport + Spiele*, p. 19.
caption: none
- pict. 04: origin: Honour/Fleming: *Weltgeschichte*, pict. 21, p. 25.
caption: none
- pict. 05: origin: Palmqvist: *Übergang*, p. 29.
caption: none
- pict. 06: origin: Klotz: *Entdeckung*, p. 33.
caption: Catal Hüyük, sketch of house A III 1 by James Mellaart.
- pict. 07: origin: Giovanni: *Piazza Armerina*, p. 37.
caption: Mosaic of „Bikini-Girls“, Villa Casale, Piazza Armerina, Sicily, Italy, ca. 340 AD.
- pict. 08: origin: Kyrkos: *Olympic Games*, pict. 75, p. 167.
caption: Panathenaic priceamphora, London, British Museum.
- pict. 09: origin: own photograph
caption: Panathenaic priceamphora, New York, Metropolitan Museum.
- pict. 10: origin: own photograph
caption: „Bikini-Girls“ (Detail), Mosaic, Villa Casale, Piazza Armerina, Sicily Italy.
- pict. 11: origin: Spathari: *Olympic Spirit*, p. 104.
caption: Female Runner, Bronze Statuette from Dodona, Athen, Nat. Archeolog. Museum.
- pict. 12: origin: Kyrkos: *Olympic Games*, pict. 86, p. 182.
caption: Long Jumper with Halteres, Paris, Louvre.
- pict. 13: origin: Kyrkos: *Olympic Games*, pict. 89, p. 186.
caption: Long Jumper with Halteres, London, British Museum.
- pict. 14: origin: Kyrkos: *Olympic Games*, pict. 85, p. 182.
caption: Male Youth running with Halteres, Heidelberg, Archeolog. Inst. of the University.
- pict. 15: origin: Kyrkos: *Olympic Games*, pict. 88, p. 185
caption: Long Jumper with Halteres, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.
- pict. 16: origin: Walther: *Codex Manesse*, p. 81.
caption: Stoneputting, Burgrave of Lienz, Manesse-script, fol. 115r.

²⁶ Ndejuru (1989), p. 445; this part of education, named „kurwanishiyaka“, was embedded into the all imbuing system of competition in the group, too.

²⁷ This ritual activity of „movement culture“ was called „gusimbuka urukiramende“ by the Tutsi; „gusimbuka“ meant high jumping, „urukiramende“ meant the dismissal of the parental family, the acknowledgment as an adult man; Ndejuru (1989), p. 448.

- pict. 17: origin: Diem: *Weltgeschichte*, pict. 314, p. 557.
caption: Stoneputting, Wrestling, Stick fencing (detail).
- pict. 18: origin: Vogt: *Mittelalter*, pict. 145, p. 179.
caption: keine
- pict. 19: origin: Diem: *Weltgeschichte*, pict. 287, p. 507.
caption: Stoneputting, Wrestling, Tree throwing.
- pict. 20: origin: Diem: *Weltgeschichte*, pict. 253, before p. 449.
caption: Diebold Schilling: Folk Festival in Einsiedeln, Tempera.
- pict. 21: origin: Piechocki: *Halloren*, Farbtafel VII, p. 138.
caption: Halloren Fisherman's sting on the Saale river in front of Halle.
- pict. 22: origin: Mecklenburg: *Afrika*, p. 115.
caption: High Jump of a Tutsi 1907.
- pict. 23: origin: Bennett: *Leichtathletik*, p. 105.
caption: High Jump of a Tutsi 1907 (reproduction of pict. 22).
- pict. 24: origin: Booth: *Field*, S. 104.
caption: High Jump of a Tutsi 1907 (reproduction of pict. 22).
- pict. 25: origin: Bale: *Imagined Olympians*, S.111.
caption: High Jump of a Tutsi 1907 (reproduction of pict. 22).
- pict. 26: origin: Guttmann: *Sports*, S.VIII.
caption: High Jump of a Tutsi 1907 (reproduction of pict. 22).
- pict. 27: origin: Mecklenburg: *Afrika*, S.115.
caption: Sign of the Retoucher (detail of pict. 22, blown up).

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