



## THE FOUNDATIONS OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN THE CIVILIZATIONS OF SUMER BABYLON AND ASSYRIA-AN ANALYTICAL STUDY IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT

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### Abstract

This research examines the intellectual and educational principles that shaped the concept of physical education in the civilizations of Sumer Babylon and Assyria as the earliest human attempts to achieve harmony between the body the mind and the spirit within an integrated educational system that aimed to build a balanced individual in strength character and moral awareness. The study seeks to uncover the philosophical and social ideas that influenced physical practices in Mesopotamia by analyzing cuneiform writings, royal inscriptions and archaeological findings that carry symbolic and ritual meanings related to movement and education. The descriptive analytical method was used to compare the forms of physical activity found in these three civilizations and to connect them with modern concepts of education through a historical perspective. The findings reveal that ancient Mesopotamian thought did not treat physical activity as entertainment but as a formative process for developing discipline, loyalty and readiness for service to the community while enhancing the sense of unity and belonging. The research concludes that physical education was an essential part of a wider cultural and religious framework that linked obedience, strength and cooperation. It recommends revisiting the Mesopotamian heritage of physical education and applying its principles in the training of teachers and coaches as this legacy represents a deep cultural foundation for understanding the evolution of human educational thought in its moral, physical and social dimensions.

**Keywords:** Physical Education / Sumer / Babylon / Assyria / Ancient Educational Thought / Mesopotamia.

### Introduction

The civilizations of Mesopotamia especially Sumer, Babylon and Assyria represented a fundamental turning point in the human history of educational thought as these civilizations laid the earliest foundations of comprehensive education that sought harmony between the development of the body, the cultivation of the mind and the refinement of the spirit. Since the third millennium BCE the Mesopotamians understood that forming a virtuous person could only be achieved through balance between strength, knowledge, worship and work. These principles were reflected in cuneiform educational systems and in the athletic rituals performed in the temples (Al-Shammari 2018; Hamid 2020).

Physical practice in Sumerian thought was linked to the philosophy of cosmic harmony where the body symbolized divine order and moral purity thus physical activity was considered a means of reinforcing values of order, discipline and collective work. In Babylon, physical education took on a wider social dimension through its association with the concept of justice and civic organization where athletic practice served to instill social values and group discipline (Al-Obaidi 2021; Al-Rahman 2019). In Assyria, physical practice developed into an organized institutional framework serving the military objectives of the state as training grounds became spaces for preparing warriors and strengthening loyalty to the central authority (Baranyai 2020).



Cuneiform texts archaeological findings and Assyrian reliefs show that physical education was not a recreational activity but a part of an integrated social religious and military system aimed at building a strong and balanced citizen capable of defending his community and serving the temples. Modern analyses reveal that physical education in Mesopotamia carried symbolic and cultural significance as it expressed the relationship between power knowledge and the human body (Zeitoun et al 2020). Reexamining this heritage provides a key to understanding the historical evolution of global physical education and confirms that ancient Mesopotamian thought was among the first to propose the concept of the complete human being in whom physical strength and spiritual elevation exist in perfect unity (Creswell and Poth 2018).

## Research Objectives

The study aims to

1. Analyze the intellectual and philosophical foundations upon which physical education was established in the civilizations of Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria.
2. Examine the relationship between physical activity and the socio-religious structure of Mesopotamia.
3. Highlight the role of physical education in shaping moral values and social discipline.
4. Compare ancient concepts with the principles of modern physical education.

## Research Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive analytical method through the analysis of historical cuneiform and archaeological texts found in temple archives and royal inscriptions comparing the results with modern studies in the history of physical education (Creswell and Poth 2018). The historical comparative approach was also employed to compare physical practices among the three civilizations across their different periods relying on reliable Iraqi and international archaeological and research sources (Abdullah 2019).

## Results and Discussion

1. The Philosophical Foundations of Mesopotamian Physical Education

The Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian texts reveal that Mesopotamian thought stemmed from a philosophical vision that viewed the human being as an integrated unit in which the forces of body, mind, and spirit interact harmoniously. The Mesopotamians believed that maintaining balance among these forces was essential to achieving inner and social harmony. According to cuneiform inscriptions found in Sumerian schools, the body was regarded as an instrument of the soul and caring for it was seen as both a moral and religious duty, linking physical practices to bodily purity and spiritual refinement (Al-Hashimi 2018; Al-Rahman 2019).

Physical exercises in Sumer had an educational purpose rather than being a form of entertainment. Archaeological evidence shows that cuneiform schools trained students in disciplined bodily movements such as sitting, walking, and running in organized patterns symbolizing the cultivation of will and self-control, similar to what is now known in modern pedagogy as behavioral education (Hamid 2020).

In Babylon, physical education acquired a deeper philosophical dimension when it became associated with the concept of justice and balance. Athletic training was viewed as a means to achieve psychological and social harmony. Just as the cosmos sought equilibrium among natural forces, human beings sought harmony between desires and duties through controlled movement. This view aligns with the "Golden Mean" philosophy later articulated by Aristotle, indicating that Mesopotamian thought was among the earliest to articulate the ethical concept of balance through physical activity (Al-Obaidi 2021).

In Assyria, physical philosophy took on a practical and military form. Exercises were performed in training arenas as organized activities for preparing soldiers and royal guards, including running, archery, wrestling, and weapon handling. Physical fitness thus became part of the concept of security and sovereignty, serving as a symbol of state power and authority (Al-Janabi 2022). Assyrian reliefs depict kings documenting their athletic



and military achievements together reflecting the unity between the body and politics in Assyrian ideology (Baranyai 2020)

These practices demonstrate that Mesopotamian physical education was never isolated from ethics religion or politics but rather reflected a comprehensive vision of the universe and humanity Movement was a manifestation of divine order and bodily discipline embodied cosmic justice affirming that Mesopotamian philosophy laid the foundation for the concept of the “complete human” integrating spiritual intellectual and physical values

## 2. Educational and Social Foundations

The Sumerian schools known as Eduba adopted a dual form of education combining intellectual and physical training Students learned writing drawing and music alongside simple exercises such as running jumping and rhythmic movement The goal was to develop a balanced personality capable of harmonizing thought and body (Al-Shammari 2018)

In Babylon early forms of health education encouraged moderation in eating sleeping and regular movement Some Babylonian laws required citizens to maintain physical readiness for public service and warfare (Hamid 2020) Inscriptions show the presence of specialized physical trainers within royal courts suggesting that physical education was an official component of the class based educational system

In Assyrian society physical activity served as a means of instilling obedience and collective discipline Participation in public games and temple festivals was not considered entertainment but rather a social ritual symbolizing submission to order and adherence to hierarchy These practices involved all social classes including soldiers priests youth and women showing the inclusive nature of physical education and its role in promoting social cohesion (Al-Rahman 2019)

It becomes evident that physical education in Mesopotamia was not merely a scholastic or military exercise but a socio moral system aimed at shaping the ideal citizen strengthening collective belonging and promoting cooperation and participation principles that form the essence of modern educational thought (Zeitoun et al 2020)

## 3. Physical Education and the Religious Dimension

Ritual texts and wall reliefs confirm that physical activities were practiced within a clear religious and ceremonial context Wrestling chariot races and spear throwing were offered as symbolic sacrifices to the gods expressing obedience and devotion The disciplined body in Mesopotamian belief mirrored divine order and mastery of movement represented mastery of the self before higher powers (Al-Shammari 2018)

In Sumerian temples coordinated bodily rituals symbolized the cycles of life and death and the connection between humanity and the divine In Babylon athletic practices were seen as acts of spiritual purification restoring balance between humans and the cosmos In Assyria military and sacred training were intertwined as the warrior was viewed as an “instrument of divine justice” reflecting the merging of religion and politics through the body as a tool of holiness and victory

These practices reveal that religion provided the overarching framework that gave physical activity meaning Physical education was essentially a form of worship comparable to “spiritual sports” in later Eastern philosophies confirming that Mesopotamian thought pioneered the integration of body and spirit within a unified religious educational system

## 5. Educational and Human Values

The findings indicate that physical activity in the civilizations of Mesopotamia helped shape a balanced individual combining courage with humility and strength with justice Exercises and rituals served to cultivate discipline responsibility and teamwork These values were part of a broader moral order aimed at preparing individuals to live within a society governed by divine order and cosmic justice (Al-Hashimi 2020 Baranyai



2020)

Cuneiform texts also show that sport served as a means of bringing people together and promoting “social peace” through participation in public festivals and games. This aligns with modern concepts in physical education such as “education through movement” and “education for peace” making the Mesopotamian legacy one of the earliest historical models linking movement with human values. The civilizations of Sumer, Babylon and Assyria thus presented a pioneering model of understanding the body as an educational instrument within a moral social framework. Their philosophical foundations remain relevant to modern educational theory. The Mesopotamian concept of the body was neither mechanical nor competitive but ethical and symbolic where movement functioned as a means of refinement and harmony rather than violence or superiority. These results confirm that the roots of human educational philosophy in physical education trace back to Mesopotamia where many modern principles such as holistic fitness discipline through movement and value based learning originated reflecting the ancient belief in the unity of body, mind and spirit.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that the civilizations of Sumer, Babylon and Assyria established as early as the third millennium BCE the intellectual and philosophical foundations of physical education making it a comprehensive human activity aimed at achieving harmony between the powers of body, mind and spirit. Cuneiform texts and archaeological evidence prove that the Mesopotamians did not view movement as mere recreation but as an educational and spiritual means to refine behavior, enhance self discipline and instill values of cooperation, obedience and loyalty to society and the state.

The findings reveal that physical education in Mesopotamia was an essential component of the broader educational system as schools such as Eduba and temples served as learning environments integrating intellectual teaching with physical training. Athletic practices in Babylon embodied the philosophy of justice and psychological balance while in Assyria they took an organized military form serving security and sovereignty. This diversity of aims and functions reflects the depth of early Mesopotamian awareness of the role of the body in shaping both the individual and society.

The study further confirms that Mesopotamian educational philosophy contributed to the foundation of what is now known as holistic education viewing the human being as an integrated entity evolving through the interaction of body, intellect and moral values. The connection between movement, religious purity and social order demonstrates that the Mesopotamians were pioneers in formulating moral, athletic concepts that remain relevant in modern educational thought such as education through movement and education for peace. Based on these findings the study recommends incorporating the Mesopotamian history of physical education into academic curricula in colleges of physical education and sport sciences for its scientific and historical value in strengthening the cultural identity of Iraq and the Arab world. It also calls for continued research into cuneiform texts and their educational content as they represent an authentic reference for understanding the evolution of human thought in education philosophy and physical culture. Reviving this legacy is not merely a recollection of history but a step toward building a modern Arab educational vision deeply rooted in Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization and human intellect.

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