

## Sports and recreation activities for young children in ancient Greece

### The young boxers of Akrotiri, Santorini (Thera)

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The Minoan civilization evolved some 4,000 years ago. Surrounded by sea, and with a strong fleet the Minoan evolved into a powerful thalassocracy (maritime supremacy). The Minoan town had almost no walls (like in later time Sparta and Macedonia). The Minoan civilization reached its peak by the year 2,000 B.C., and it maintained cultural and commercial links with the Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians.<sup>1-8</sup>

The renowned sport of ancient Minoan civilization, open to both genders and subjecting all to the same standards, was bull leaping. This was a dangerous pastime, but harmless and humane to the athlete and the animal if performed with skill. A bull would be released to charge toward the jumper. Once it was in sufficient proximity, the performer would attach his hands to the bull's horns and vault onto the creature's back. Another common objective was to somersault from such a position to a state of standing on a spot of land directly behind the bull (Fig 1).

Boxing was also a favorite activity. The precise regulations are unknown, but this is perhaps a source of inspiration for later Greeks, who adapted the sport to the Olympic Games. This fresco of Young Boxers is from Santorini (Thera) (1550 BC) represents the oldest known portrayal of a boxing sport, complete with gloves (Fig 2).

The painting depicts two boys with their heads shaved but for two long locks dangling at the back and two shorter ones above the forehead. They each wear a belt and have a boxing glove on their right hands. Their large exaggerated eyes are common in the Aegean frescoes of this period. The boy to the left wears jewelry consisting of a necklace and two bracelets, one on the arm and the other around the ankle. The other boy is unadorned, probably in order to indicate his lower social status. This scene may depict the boys taking part in an initiation rite.<sup>1-5</sup>

Made with a hand painted, aged appearance on a wood surface with brilliant blue and brown fresco hues. This wall painting was found in one of the houses in the settlement of Akrotiri which was destroyed by the sixteenth-century BC volcanic eruption there. The Greek Bronze Age settlement is on the Greek island of Santorini, associated with the Minoan civilization due to close similarities in artifact and fresco styles.

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Figure 1. A fresco found at the Minoan site of Knossos, indicating a sport or ritual of "bull leaping", the red skinned figure is a man and the two light skinned figures are women



Figure 2. Children boxing in a fresco on the island of Santorini

Frescoes, pottery, furniture, advanced drainage systems and three-storey buildings have been discovered at Akrotiri, whose excavation was started in 1967 by Spyridon Marinatos. Dating from the Bronze Age, late Bronze Age, 16<sup>th</sup> c. B.C., the fresco adorned the south wall of a second-floor room in House B, where other frescoes were also uncovered.<sup>3-6</sup>

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