

# Running Phenomena in Ancient Sumer

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## Organized Physical Activity in Sumer

The amalgam of city states that was ancient Sumer thrived from about 3,000 B.C. Although eclipsed by neighboring Semites circa 1,800 B.C., Sumer's cultural influence was felt throughout the ancient Near East long after its cities had fallen. We know from the extant records, in the form of art and cuneiform inscriptions upon clay tablets, that the Sumerians placed considerable emphasis on the human body. As was the case for all ancient civilizations, theirs was a very physical existence. Although no archaeological remains of athletic sites have been discovered, there is evidence in other forms of a Sumerian sportive propensity. Wrestlers are depicted in statues and upon seals and stela; they are also described in administrative documents and in epic poetry.<sup>1</sup> Fist-fighters are mentioned,<sup>2</sup> and what appears to be some form of pugilism is also shown in bas-relief.<sup>3</sup>

Instances of physical performances related to the cult festivals that were central to Sumerian religious life were also quite common.<sup>4</sup> Cuneiform texts tell of sport and entertainment put on by cult entertainers as integral components of the celebrations given for Inanna, the Sumerian goddess of love, fertility, and war. Music, general festivity and play were said to be widespread in the land.<sup>5</sup>

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1. Ake W. Sjöberg, "Trials of Strength, Athletics in Mesopotamia," *Expedition* 27, no. 2 (1985): 7. Additionally, Vera Olivova, *Sports and Games in the Ancient World* (New York: St. Martin's, 1984), 38–39. See also Petrus S. Vermaak, "The Contest Theme in the Seals from Mesopotamia," in *Sport and Contest: The Proceedings of the 1991 International ISHPES Congress Held in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria 31 May–6 June 1991*, ed. Roland Renson, Teresa Gonzalez Aja, Gilbert Andrieu, Manfred Lammer, and Roberta Park (Madrid: INEF, 1993), 47–69. Also of interest is Gratiannie Offner's examination of the famous wrestling vase of Tell Agrab in "Jeux Corporels en Sumer: Documents Relatifs a la Competition Athletique," *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archeologie Orientale* 56, no. 1 (1962), 31–38.

2. Walther Sallaberger, *Der kultische Kalender der Ur III—Zeit*, (Untersuchungen zur Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie, Band 7/1). (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993) 178.

3. M.A. Poliakoff, *Combat Sport in the Ancient World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 69.

4. Festivals complete with games and dancing are described in the Sumerian Gilgamesh Epic. Music was provided at Sumer's festivals by specially trained slave girls; poets and minstrels were said to recite fables and stories. H.W.F. Saggs, *Everyday Life in Babylonia and Assyria* (New York: Dorset, 1965).

5. Anne D. Kilmer, "An Oration on Babylon," *Altorientalische Forschungen* 18 (1991): 16.

An extensive array of entertainment related to the Ishtar cult in the Mesopotamian city of Mari around 1,800 B.C. has also been recorded.<sup>6</sup> Jugglers, wrestlers, and tumbling acrobats all took part in the festivals.<sup>7</sup> Other activities more familiar to the modern reader were also known. Anne Kilmer has described a Sumero-Akkadian game, *pukku-mekku* (ball and stick), which appears, at least on the surface, to have some similarities to field hockey and the Irish game of hurling. This was played in connection with marriage ceremonies in the time of King Gilgamesh of Uruk (circa 2,600 B.C.).<sup>8</sup> Games of chance also have been found. The beautifully inlaid gaming boards that were in use at Ur around 2,600 B.C., for example, suggest a society that enjoyed all manner of pastimes and entertainment.<sup>9</sup>

An economic-administrative document from the third dynasty of the city of Ur (circa 2,000 B.C.) contains an entry that Ake W. Sjöberg has translated as "athletes."<sup>10</sup> The specific context is "beer as a ration for athletes." Sjöberg has used the term "athletes" in citing two other documents from the same period. These recorded foods (specifically lambs and flour) delivered to the "house of the athletes."<sup>11</sup> In each context, Sjöberg has translated the Sumerian cuneiform sign combination *gespu-ba-lirum* as "athletes."<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that when Sjöberg translates an entry in a later Assyrian text (circa 1,200 B.C.) to also read "athletes," he parenthetically notes that "athletes" is literally "the strong ones" in the original.<sup>13</sup>

Sjöberg attested that these and other Sumerian documents reveal that "athletes were an organized group, supported, and run by the state or temple" and, further, that there seems to have been an old custom of arranging "athletics and trials of strength as a part of preparations for a wedding."<sup>14</sup> Though this evidence

6. Though northerly, Mari was culturally influenced by Sumer. The Semitic Akkadians, who were dominant in much of northern Mesopotamia, and who eventually came to control all that was ancient Sumer, used the name Ishtar for the Sumerian goddess Inanna. It should be noted that the Akkadian language was commonly used in Sumer even before the Semites came to full dominance there.

7. Kilmer, "An Oration on Babylon," 15–16.

8. "A Note on an Overlooked Word-Play in the Akkadian Gilgamesh—Pukku and Mekku, 'Ball and Stick'" in *Zikir Sumim, Assyriological Studies Presented to F.R. Krauss*, ed. G. van Driel, T. Krispijn, M. Stol, and K. Veenhof, (Leiden: E.G. Brill, 1982), 128–132. Kilmer concluded that the rough sport of *pukku-mekku*, using a large, solid wooden ball and a long wood stick (the stick in question is described as like a hockey stick or type of mallet, having the same general shape as a long-handled ax with a blade) was one of, if not the prominent game played in connection with marriage ceremonies of around 2,600 B.C.

9. Leonard Woolley, *Ur: The First Phases* (London: Penguin Books, 1946), 35. See also Anne D. Kilmer, "Games and Toys in Ancient Mesopotamia" in *Actes du XII Congrès International des Sciences Préhistoriques et Protohistoriques Held in Bratislava 1–7 September 1991*, ed. Juraj Pavuk, (Bratislava: 1993), 359–364.

10. The term athlete has traditionally denoted one who takes part in physical competition for a prize; while Sjöberg uses the term, he does not make clear whether in this context he considers Sumer's "athletes" competitors in prize events.

11. Sjöberg, *Expedition*, 9. Each of the "athletic" documents is cited fully in Sjöberg's notes. It should be noted that the volume of provisions was significant. In the first document it was recorded that one-hundred liters of beer were provided.

12. Wolfgang Heimpel does not concur with Sjöberg's translation. Heimpel does, however, posit that the first part of the sign indicates a "hook used by wrestlers." Wolfgang J. Heimpel (Professor of Assyriology), interview by author, University of California, Berkeley, 4 January 1995.

13. Sjöberg, *Expedition*, 9.

14. Sjöberg, *Expedition*, 8–9.

does not identify a specific athletic activity, other sources provide more detail. They refer to palace runners, some form of pugilism, and particularly wrestlers.

The Akkadian term *lismu*, meant a “run”: moreover, the designation *lasimu* is known from early times in Sumer and means military runner.<sup>15</sup> Another form of organized running is suggested in that the term *lismu* may also be translated as “race.”<sup>16</sup> It is recorded that one group of men in ancient Sumer used their particular physical capabilities to support themselves. Considerable extant materials contain commentary on the existence of what can best be described as a royal corps of messenger runners. In early Sumer, the vital task of disseminating official documents throughout the ancient land was that of the king’s runners. It is known that runners received land as part of their compensation. It also appears that runners oiled their bodies in some fashion. In the Ur document which detailed beer as a ration for “athletes,” it was also recorded that “five liters of plant oil” were sent as “anointing oil” for the “runners.”<sup>17</sup>

In addition to those events that served utilitarian, cultic, and entertainment ends, certain physical feats appear to have been important for political purposes. Sumer’s royalty were quite aware of the importance of presenting a fine physical self. For example, early Mesopotamian kings were regularly reported to have performed acts of great manly prowess. The monarch was often portrayed as powerfully fleet-of-foot. Running swiftly seems to have been considered a significant part of the king’s physical attributes. Though kingship was different in Egypt, the rulers of Sumer’s contemporary neighbor considered ceremonial running important enough to have artists depict them undertaking the ritual.<sup>18</sup> In societies where physical dominance was important, a running performance would have provided an arena for the display of the monarch’s power.

Claims that purport kings engaging in heroic physical activity must, however, be carefully weighed. During an era when kings were killed in battle, Sumer’s royal hymnic poets often used extravagant imagery in an effort to create, maintain, or bolster the royal image. Portraying a king as heroically brave and in possession of a powerful physique was intended to increase and spread his renown. A powerful man could be expected to gain respect from friends and instill apprehension in enemies. With these ends in mind, it appears that much of Sumer’s poetry of royal adoration may have been embellishment on behalf of the king’s physical virility.<sup>19</sup> Thus, attempting to disentangle reality from

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15. On this, other related terms, and messenger runners in general, see the 1973 edition of *The Assyrian Dictionary L* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute), 104–108.

16. *The Assyrian Dictionary*, 208.

17. L. Legrain, *Business Documents of the Third Dynasty of Ur*. Ur Excavation Texts Vol. 3 (1937–47). (London: The British Museum), No. 1137, line 3–4.

18. Wolfgang Decker devotes an entire chapter to the “Athletic Kings” in *Sports and Games of Ancient Egypt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

19. King Shulgi of Ur had his musical, intellectual, and physical attributes celebrated extensively in self-laudatory hymns during his reign. A motivation behind some of this manner of communication seems to have been the “recurrent destructive wars that plagued Sumer.” S. N. Kramer’s *From the Poetry of Sumer: Creation, Glorification, Adoration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 66. There are contradictory spellings of the king’s name in the literature; the more common usage, Shulgi, will be used in this work.

exaggeration is difficult within this hymn genre.<sup>20</sup>

Fortunately, other evidence of a more prosaic nature provides additional insight into Sumer's sportive history. Three texts dating from the waning years of the Sumerian civilization (the period beginning around 2,000 B.C.) concern what appear to be organized running events. Two are administrative documents and refer to offerings made on the occasion of city races held in the Sumerian city of Umma. One is a legal contract that specifies a particular time period for foot-races. Additionally, from the same period there is a royal hymn which purports to describe a long-distance running feat by the ruling monarch, King Shulgi.<sup>21</sup> The first three seem to refer to group activities; the fourth relates to the alleged action of an individual of high status. Each will be considered in the following sections.

## City Races

The two administrative cuneiform texts from the Sumerian city of Umma (located midway between Nippur and Ur) contain evidence of footraces.<sup>22</sup> Both tablets date to the reign of King Shu-Suen (the second of Shulgi's sons to rule in Sumer); Shu-Suen held power from 2,038 B.C. until 2,030 B.C. The texts are accounting documents that record the livestock provided for rites.

On the obverse of the first Umma cuneiform tablet is inscribed:

two fattened rams  
one full-fleeced he-lamb  
an offering of the king, at the temple of  
the goddess Gula of Umma  
(by) foot of Ninmaraka  
the cup bearer  
one ram, one male goat  
at the great gate of the god Shara

The reverse of the tablet reads:

one ram, one male goat  
at the great gate of the goddess Nintu

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20. Sumer's panegyrists were certainly inclined toward exaggeration and the use of fabulous animal allegory when praising the beauty and adeptness of the king. As an example, in a hymn that praised King Shulgi of Ur for undertaking a long-distance run, the monarch's efforts are compared to a fierce lion furiously charging; the image of a galloping wild ass is similarly used. While poetic exaggeration and allegory were used to describe Shulgi's purported fear, this should not relegate the run to the realm of fantasy.

21. Shulgi's purported physical feats were not only celebrated in his own time but in the centuries that followed his reign. Jacob Klein has reported that King Ismedagan (ruler of Isin, 1953–1935 B.C.) had a copper statue of Shulgi erected in Nippur's Ekur temple. The statue depicted Shulgi running toward Nippur; its purpose was to commemorate Shulgi's famous cultic-sportive event of some 150 years earlier. Records also depict Ismedagan, a great imitator of Shulgi, as an excellent runner. It is reported that Ismedagan ran in the service of the great deity Enlil. Ismedagan also gave instructions that a statue depicting himself running toward Nippur should be fashioned and erected as a reminder of his piety. Jacob Klein, "Shulgi and Ismedagan: Originality and Dependence in Sumerian Royal Hymnology," chap. in *Bar-Ilan Studies in Assyriology: Dedicated to Pinhas Artzi*, ed. Jacob Klein and Aaron Skaist (Jerusalem: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990), 65–79.

22. These references were brought to my attention by Wolfgang J. Heimpel.

on the occasion of the city race-making  
 from (personal name)  
 tablet of the governor  
 eighth month,  
 year of King Shu-Suen.<sup>23</sup>

This document recorded animal offerings from the king and another individual of very high status. Both gave livestock that were, it seems clear, intended to be sacrificed at a temple and at two city gates on the occasion of what is described in the text as “city race-making.” This was an autumn-time occasion (the eighth month in Sumer being equivalent to the period between October 15 and November 15 of our modern calendar). The importance of the event is suggested by its elite benefactors; additionally, the king provided his own high-ranking cup-bearer to deliver the goods on foot. The event clearly had ritual significance. The offerings were directed toward the city gates named for the divinities Shara (the primary god of Umma) and Nintu (the Sumerian mother goddess), and to the temple of Gula (the goddess of healing).

The second Umma document is again from the time of King Shu-Suen’s reign. It is an accounting tablet in the collections of the British Museum. The entire text concerns the enumeration and, presumably, the transportation of numerous fattened swine. Lines eight and nine on the reverse of the tablet state that under the authority of Dingir-ra,<sup>24</sup> two fat male pigs were to be used for the occasion of the “race-making.”<sup>25</sup>

This evidence suggests that in at least one of Sumer’s cities the populace had at certain times during the year occasion to celebrate organized running events. Exactly what these represented to the ancient populace we do not know. The tablets constitute the entirety of the evidence uncovered to date that relates to these running phenomena. The two Umma tablets are straightforward records of everyday commercial life. Although they do not provide evidence of distance, duration, number and type of participant and the like, the tablets explicitly state that animals were offered at city gates and at a temple on the occasion of city races. The occasions appear to have been made up of “race” followed or preceded by feast.

The third text originating from southern Sumer during the Old Babylonian period (circa 1,800 B.C.) also refers to foot-racing. The tablet is a contract that details the required repayment of a loan in the “foot-race month.” This month is unidentified, and the reference was perhaps only important locally; nonetheless, foot-racing, at least in that locale, was evidently a well-known phenomenon.<sup>26</sup>

23. M. Sigrist, D.I. Owen, and G.D. Young, *Materiali Per Il Vocabolario Neosumerico Vol. XIII: The John Frederick Lewis collection, Part II* (Roma: Multigra Fica Editrice, 1984), Plate CXXI, number 775. The text was translated for the author by Professors Heimpel and Kilmer of the Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of California, Berkeley.

24. A common Sumerian personal name.

25. S. Sato and Tohru Gomi, *Selected Neo-Sumerian Administrative Texts From the British Museum* (Abiko, Japan: The Research Institute Chuo-Gakuin University, 1990), Plate 436 (BM 106149), 169–170. The text was translated for the author by Professors Heimpel and Kilmer of the University of California, Berkeley.

26. *Texts in the Iraq Museum 7*, (Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1971), text 15, line 9. The text was translated for the author by Professor Kilmer of the University of California, Berkeley.

This is not the only indication of organized running in ancient Sumer. Other evidence, some from earlier in the same century as the “city race-making,” sheds additional light on running events and perhaps the role of the physical in Sumer’s wider culture. This fourth document pertains to an event of substantial proportions attributed to Shulgi, king of the city of Ur.

## A King’s Run

King Shulgi of Ur (Shu-Suen’s father) ruled the southern cities of Sumer from 2,094 B.C. to 2,047 B.C.<sup>27</sup> In 1981, Kramer examined the ancient self-laudatory hymn that celebrated the Mesopotamian monarch’s alleged round-trip run (reported to be something close to 200 miles) between the cities of Nippur and Ur.<sup>28</sup> The royal hymn is one of numerous pieces the king commissioned to praise his mental and physical abilities. Jacob Klein has dated the Shulgi hymn to the seventh year of the king’s reign.<sup>29</sup> The author of the celebratory piece is presumed to be Shulgi’s panegyrist.<sup>30</sup>

The royal hymn recorded that on the occasion of an *eshesh*<sup>31</sup> celebration in 2,088 B.C., King Shulgi planned to appear at two far-distant festival locations (Nippur and Ur) in order to be seen in celebration with his subjects at each site. He was to celebrate the *eshesh* feasts in the important cities on the “same day” and thus gain universal fame and recognition.<sup>32</sup> To do so, Shulgi, it was claimed, ran the distance between the two sites.<sup>33</sup> A truly remarkable physiological feat, if actually performed. A run of such distance seems so extraordinary as to suggest

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27. The early kings of Sumer probably came to power by virtue of their military strength; the best warrior, called upon in time of civic need, often ascended to a kingship role. A continued display of personal prowess was important for the monarch to maintain control over his position and his realm. At the time of Shulgi’s reign, Sumer was not a homogeneous peaceful area. Inter-city strife was a constant concern: there was also the threat of attack from outside Sumer. As a military leader, Shulgi would have needed to balance the allegiances of the cities within his realm to assure their continued inclusion and participation in his kingdom.

28. S.N. Kramer, “Shulgi of Ur: The First Long Distance Champion,” in *History Begins at Sumer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981). Today the ancient sites in question are situated some ninety-six miles apart when measured by air; In antiquity the distance between the points may have been considerably more on foot.

29. Jacob Klein, *Three Sulgi Hymns: Sumerian Royal Hymns Glorifying King Sulgi of Ur* (Tel Aviv: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1981), 181. Klein does not give the actual year, but from other evidence 2,088 b.c. is assumed.

30. Wolfgang J. Heimpel (Professor of Assyriology), interview by author, University of California, Berkeley, 13 July 1992.

31. Though various spellings are to be found in the literature *eshesh* will be used throughout this work. Few details are known regarding this lunar festival; it is clear, however, that animal sacrifices were an integral part of the occasion. By Shulgi’s time, the festival had become a more regular occurrence than the original monthly celebration.

32. Klein, *Three Sulgi Hymns*, 179.

33. In the hymn Shulgi specifically refers to himself as the runner; he reports that in preparation for the run he dons a “girdle” about his loins. To more fully understand the claim made for Shulgi, one must be cognizant that Sumer’s days were measured from sunset to sunset. To appear at both sites, given that he had completed the first one-hundred mile leg of the run from northern Nippur to southern Ur before the onset of the festival, would allow a maximum of twenty-four hours for Shulgi’s return run to Nippur. The chronicle claimed that after sacrificing oxen and sheep at Ur’s city temple and participating in bathing and feasting, Shulgi awakened in enough time to complete the return journey to Nippur to participate in the *eshesh* festival that was underway there. He “sped along the course” toward Nippur, arriving before nightfall, thus attaining his goal of being in both cities to celebrate their festivals on the same “day.”

royal aggrandizement or exaggeration. However, before categorizing the hymn as such, it will be necessary to demonstrate the impossibility of any human completing two such runs of approximately one hundred miles each with only a brief respite.

To examine such a feat, a series of issues needs to be addressed: (1) topography, (2) climate, (3) fluid intake and nutrition, and (4) the limits of human performance. If Shulgi did undertake the run, he would have had topographical and meteorological advantages. First, the Sumerians were situated on the plain the Greeks later called Mesopotamia, so named because it was the “land between two rivers.”<sup>34</sup> Second, and probably most significant, the precise time of the *eshesh* festival in question has not been identified, but it is probable that if a run of such magnitude were undertaken it would have taken place during the cooler months of the year.<sup>35</sup> This is particularly important; to run such distances during Sumer’s hot and humid summer months would have been especially difficult, if not mortally dangerous. Two Neo-Assyrian references are perhaps illustrative even though they post-date Shulgi’s purported run by many centuries. They mention foot-races occurring during the winter and spring, explicitly stating that these took place in the months of *Kislimu* (December 15 to January 15) and *Ajaru* (April 15 to May 15).<sup>36</sup>

Third, Shulgi could not have completed his purported long-distance running feat without pausing to drink.<sup>37</sup> Fortunately for Shulgi, numerous “way stations” existed along his land’s roadways.<sup>38</sup> The king, long on the road, would have needed to take advantage of the stations to pause, even if briefly, to rehydrate himself.<sup>39</sup> Modern exercise physiologists require considerable information regarding individual diet (among other things) before determining ability to undertake long-duration exercise. If some early Mesopotamians did partake of regular vigorous physical activity, such as running races or engaging in combat

34. S.N. Kramer, *Cradle of Civilization* (New York: Time-Life, 1967), 11.

35. The hymn’s portrayal of Shulgi’s northward struggle through a major thunder and hail storm leads Heimpel to posit that the event would have taken place during the period equal to the early months of the modern year: the storm is referred to on lines 62–69 of the hymn, on page 197 of *Three Sulgi Hymns*.

36. Both texts date from the middle of the first millennium b.c. The *Kislimu* text published in *Zeitschrift Fur Assyriologie* 51, (1961): 138, line 57; the *Ajaru* text in O.R. Gurney and J.J. Finkelstein, *SultanTepi Tablets* (London: British Institute of Archaeology, 1957), no. 87, reverse line 8. I owe the references to these texts to Professor Kilmer of the University of California, Berkeley.

37. In warmer climates, sweat rates during exercise can exceed four liters per hour. The loss of water and electrolytes during prolonged exercise, especially in hot conditions, can lead to serious impairment of the body’s thermoregulatory and cardiovascular functions. George A Brooks and T.D. Fahey, *Fundamentals of Human Performance* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 278. See also A.K. Lindeman, 1992, “Eating for Endurance and Ultraendurance,” *Physician and Sport Medicine* 20, (March 1992): 92.

38. The way stations were known as *danna* houses and were placed at about two hours walking distance apart on the roadside. It is claimed (lines 29–35 of the hymn, on pages 191–193 of *Three Sulgi Hymns*) that Shulgi had these lodging-houses built. The *danna* equaled some 10.8 kilometers, or approximately 6.7 miles. Heimpel, interview, 13 July 1992.

39. It can be assumed that a minimum of thirty-five to forty minutes would be required to run the distance between *danna* houses during an endurance run of the distance purported. To prevent hypohydration one would need to drink at least every thirty minutes (The time needed to cover the distance between *danna* houses would probably be much more if environmental conditions were harsh.) The distances involved would, therefore, have made it necessary for a long-distance runner to take fluid at times other than at the *danna* houses.

sports, an appropriate diet would have been required to meet the expenditure of energy required. Although they did not possess the chemical knowledge of foodstuffs that is now available, early populations often had a remarkable practical understanding of the natural world and how to interact with it. It is evident that the basic ingredients required to establish the balanced dietary intake that would have been necessary for the significant energy expenditure of the type attributed to Shulgi were certainly known to the ancient Mesopotamians.<sup>40</sup>

Fourth, evidence that lends credence to at least the possibility of Shulgi's journey may be seen in the numerous examples of other well documented endurance feats.<sup>41</sup> Two records are of particular pertinence to Shulgi's purported run. During the first forty-eight hours of the 1985 Sydney to Melbourne footrace, Greek ultramarathoner Yannis Kouros completed 287 miles. This impressive distance was accomplished without pausing for sleep.<sup>42</sup> In the 1970s a British athlete running on a track completed 100 miles in a time of eleven hours and thirty one minutes.<sup>43</sup> The latter distance is comparable to that which separates Nippur and Ur.

Although it would have been an exceedingly demanding task, Shulgi could have run from Nippur to Ur. The northward return may also have been possible. Completion of such a daunting mission would have required a highly trained physiological state. Klein has termed part of the alleged feat a "fast march," even though the hymn brims with descriptions of the king running.<sup>44</sup> It is possible that Shulgi utilized a mixture of running and walking to complete the purported two-legged journey.

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40. Saggs, in *Everday Life in Babylonia and Assyria*, 60-61, notes that in Mari, around 1,800 B.C., people ate beef, mutton, and fish. Four varieties of bread were available, the commonest being an unleavened form of thin crisp disks made from whole-meal barley flour. Another type was leavened bread, while the others were probably more like pastries since they contained sesame oil and "honey," which probably meant date-syrup. Commonly used vegetables were cucumbers, peas, beans, something like cress, and garlic. Dates were the most common fruit, but grapes and figs were often mentioned. Beer was made locally, but wine had to be imported. Heimpel suggests that Shulgi's diet was probably mixed. During his reign, mutton, goat meat, unleavened bread, and beer were all widely consumed. Fowl, pork, fish, and "honey" could also have been a part of the royal menu. Shulgi would have had available a wide variety of fruits, nuts, and vegetables: among them were dates, leeks, onions, and dried apples. It may be concluded, therefore, that Shulgi had access to the types of food that an endurance run would have required.

41. Long distance runs are well established as a part of athletic history. For a thorough comparative examination of ancient and modern long-distance running, see Hugh M. Lee, "Modern Ultra-Long Distance Running and Phillipides' Run from Athens to Sparta." *Ancient World* IX, nos. 3&4 (August 1984): 107-113.

42. George P. Rontoyannis, George Skoulis and Konstantin N. Pavlou, "Energy Balance in Ultramarathon Running." *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 49, (1985), 976-979.

43. K.F. Dwyer and T. Dwyer, *Running Out of Time* (Kensington, Australia: New South Wales University Press, 1984), 77.

44. Klein, *Three Sulgi Hymns*, 180.

## Conclusion

The historical importance of the Shulgi hymn, the two Umma administrative texts, and the brief reference regarding the foot-race month may now be more fully appreciated. The city race and foot-race month evidence are plain administrative documentation; conversely, the panegyrist's work is exciting and suggestive of a mortal with almost divinely-granted prowess. With regard to the latter, we of the late twentieth century are at a disadvantage when attempting to determine such a document's meaning in its own archaic context. The value that the modern world places upon objective evidence tends to make one less sensitive to the importance that earlier populations placed on subjective understandings. As a consequence, we will struggle to appreciate what in Shulgi's hymn was fact and what was elaboration. In ancient Sumer, was it necessary for rulers to prove publicly their might during battle and by performing extraordinary physical feats? Or, was it enough that the monarch be described or portrayed as accomplishing such deeds?

It is of paramount importance to situate these activities within a Sumerian society that was both blessed by and bound to the intense irrigation and agriculture needed to support considerable urban centers and their populations. Early man was inclined toward all kind of extravagant deeds that were intended to please those deities deemed responsible for the continuation of his earthly, agrarian-based existence. It can be hypothesized that both the city runs and Shulgi's alleged feat were, in part, attempts through manipulation of common symbols (in each case the human body displayed in the run) to please the deities responsible for the seasonal cycles and thus gain their good will with regard to the maintenance of a regular, and thus predictable, existence. As seen in other ancient cultures, this kind of manipulation of the human body operated as a mechanism through which supernatural benevolence was believed to be achieved. A monarch's extreme physical feat might have served to reinforce both personal power and honor the seasonal gods. Running, along with wrestling, some form of pugilism, and numerous other activities tied to bodily performance fit nicely within a framework suggesting the corporeal as an instrument widely used in the ritual and perhaps political performances of Sumer. Who the city runners and the other participants were, as well as the details and motivation behind the events, remain to be discovered. The importance of strenuous bodily activity to the culture is undeniable, however, and for now it is symbolized well in the claims made for King Shulgi, the long-distance runner.