

# Study on Leisure and Sports in The Middle Ages from the perspective Of Daily Life

Mengbing Wu\*

Wuxi Foreign Language School, Wuxi, China

\*Correspondence Author: 100272@yzpc.edu.cn

**Abstract.** Life in the middle ages has always been a hot topic of great concern and debate in the history circle. In the past, people always thought that the life of medieval people was monotonous and difficult, and it was always closely linked with religion. With the deepening of academic research, especially the perspective of daily life history research, people's understanding of medieval life has been greatly broadened, and medieval life has become more three-dimensional and rich. As some scholars believe, life in the Middle Ages was actually happier and more leisurely. This paper is also based on the perspective of daily life history, focusing on the sports and leisure topics of medieval life through case analysis. In addition to introducing the academic debates of medieval life, this paper will focus on the basic background and main leisure ways of this period, such as football and intelligence games and other sports activities and game entertainment. This paper holds that the sports and leisure styles in the middle ages represent the common characteristics of the common people and the aristocrats in this period. These types of leisure and the rules or roles in the games can also be regarded as a powerful epitome of this period. Although this paper hopes to discuss the popular connotation of daily life, there are still some deficiencies in the detailed analysis of this paper. This paper is expected to cause extensive discussion on the study of daily life in the middle ages.

**Keywords:** The middle ages, Leisure and sports, Daily life.

## 1. Introduction

The Middle Ages has always been regarded as a negative representative in many people's perspectives. It may simply due to the stop of developing in both traditional culture and economy which always remained still during this period without any special achievements. Consequently, no matter what the historical value of the Middle Ages was, people firmly hold the opinion that it was not a dominant time period. Negative information about the Middle Ages spread vastly in the later thousands of years. What is worse that almost everything in this period became negative and dark. In fact, life in the middle ages were not as the same as the depictions in any literatures that themed a Middle Ages topic [1].

Although the life for the people who lived in the middle ages were not such convenient and comfortable as modern society is, little evidence exists that the life at that time was too primitive as we imagined. However, the legacy of Roman civilisation always exist and never disappear, even during the Dark Ages. People enjoyed the previous advantages and the historical evolution did not post a threat to people's daily life. They were just like people lived in present days, having their own entertainments, dietary, method to preserve food and drinks. More deeply for the entertainment, the first step they had to deal with ware the working days. As the majority of busy days were in the seasons excepted summer whereas they did not have a clear rule to set the days for rest. In fact, the daily life of peasants in medieval Europe was hectic and boring. They spend most of their time on labor all year round. Even in winter, there is still a huge amount of farm work for them to finish. They used to have a principle to cut the working days into ten days as a period in some specific religious belief. The calendars and clock towers consequently built as a representative of recording the time passes. In later period, labours invented a method of fixing working hours as a primary way of resting due to the impossibility to change the salaries. Although it seems like that people in the middle ages were very busy and have much farm work to complete, they did not have the same level of pressure as people in the present days. Medieval peasants worked far less time than that of people in present society around 40 hours per week. Once an American researcher did a research into the entertainment

of the middle ages and she was shocked by the data. It was reported in the research that people at present were working longer days and receiving little rest than a medieval peasant. However, the peasants remained still extremely poor, with no provision and availability of food with superior nutrient quality, little possibility to eat meat on their tables, and simple clothing. Some people say that people in that time have almost nothing to entertain with and no entertainment except in some specific individual religious festivals. The prior cause of this phenomenon appears to be the low level of the exploitation of lords, technology at that time and the control of religion [2].

However, there are other people argued that peasants in the middle ages were not working as strict and hectic as the former statement described. They did not have to rest in a hurry in their afternoon rest and even took a snap after working in the first part of a day. The life pace in their life was more slow compared to present days and it was even much more relaxing and entertaining. People who hold this opinion give a statement that people in the middle ages may not be wealthy enough but they did have a huge amount of time for them to unwind and leisure. Some documents record that labours in the middle ages will take a rest in the morning by having his breakfast. Taking a snap could also be seen as a necessary step during work at noon. And lately, the refreshments or drinks in the afternoon. This steps comprised of the most part of their working days. When evening came, they would leave their working places after the first stroke of the clock, no matter what significant or accident events happened. Not the same as the traditional paintings of life in the middle ages, peasants seem to be not such exhausted in a working day. It is said that workers in the 13th century had the vocations up to 25 weeks annually. More vividly, an American could have 16 days of rest on a yearly basis. Although the long working time period of peasants extending from the early morning to the late evening, they were asked and stopped to have their meals and snaps at noon or even afternoon-teas [1][2].

On the other people's view, they combined the leisure and entertainment of people in the middle ages with the religion. Leisure is considered to be the service of God in essence in order to introduce people to express their gratitudes and appreciation to God or to contemplate God with a pure and peaceful mind to receive enlightenment [3]. Therefore, to explore people's concept of leisure in the Middle Ages, it must be examined in the social background and value system constructed by Christian religious culture. The ancient Greek philosophers linked leisure with happiness and tranquility. They believed that only in leisure can people become human beings while Christianity defines the meaning and legal status of leisure in the form of dogmas and religious decrees. After the development of the society and culture, Medieval Christian culture still has the ideal of leisure, but its value to the ultimate concern of people is different [4][5]. But in general, during most of the Middle Ages, wars were frequent, and social entertainment activities were few, especially for the people in lower classes, coupled with the strict hierarchy of the church and class system, people's leisure life was limited to some significant extents and it did loss the vivid colour due to these reasons mentioned. Leisure methods always acted a role of way of relaxing but not the purposes. There were some basic forms of leisure such as Sabbath celebrations, prayer and religious worship. Festival entertainment in rural society were also various and interesting. These formed some part of basic understandings of the local culture. What is surprising is that the original religious parades in the middle ages in the 11th century even had a lot of features in common with present tourism industry [6][7].

Based on the previous research on the daily life in the middle ages, this paper focuses on the sports and leisure in the daily life in the middle ages. Some scholars have discussed the view of leisure in the middle ages, and some scholars have conducted special research on sports and leisure activities of some special groups [7][8]. In this field, there are relatively many special studies on medieval sports [9][10]. This paper will try to make a preliminary analysis of some of these cases and summarize their historical characteristics.

## 2. Leisure and sports in the Middle Ages

Although the life and working conditions in that period was poor and extreme, people of the Middle Ages enjoyed a surprisingly wide range of leisure activities, from sports that tested physical strength and agility to sophisticated games that tested intellects and reasoning skills. However, not only because of the strict gaps and restrictions between different class but also the limited amount of money gained by ordinary people, the kinds of entertainments available to people in that period are also distinct. For example, some small part of leisure were only available to nobles [1]. Due to the background of the specific time period, the need for strong physical strength became actually normal in people's mind. Some of the sports even became the exercises for the soldiers in armies while some of them were merely used for entertainment. People in that period tend to use sports not only for leisure but also for showing off how powerful their bodies were.

### 2.1 Sports aimed at strengthening the body

Football were incredibly popular among people in the middle times but the words description of it was scarce. Some of the documents with words and figures showed people used a ball which was filled with straw and other wadding whereas some of the materials said some of animals' organs would be used as the objects to play, originally started in the regions of England in the middle times. This sports in that period was completely different compared to that in present days. People played football together without any protections. There was no access to gloves, the protecting clothes made of professional materials, not to mention the helmets. As a result, it was regarded as a dangerous entertainment because number of people who got hurt from the games were extremely large. There is always something horrible happened after the matches such as hurts and even death. Arguments were increasingly raised between players and their families against the opposers. In 1314, Edward II, the king of England, pushed to publish a rule against football. If someone who broke the rule, he or she would hand in a huge amount of fine and even be sent to the prison for a long time. It is said that another reason for limitation of football may simply due to the private desire of rulers to push the soldier to play the military sports more in spite of the entertained one.

There was a sports which was extremely similar to golf in the middle ages. It did not have a professional name but it was categorised into golf according to the recent researches. It was a sports that involve the hit of balls. Players had to hit the two sides of a tiny ball and made it dipped into a small hole. This kind of sports could be regarded as the originals of golf in present days. It was not limited because the rulers only set boundaries for the football but not mentioned this kind of ball games. As a result, people still played golf secretly between ordinary people. However, the potential danger of this sports also can be compared to that of football. Because of the fall-behind time background, the rules were simple and direct - hit the ball into the goal without any further restrictions or protected methods. Therefore, players in this game used almost every method in order to win the matches, even hit other players head, leading to a terrible number of people who got injuries. What hilarious is that people who were drunk were also agreed to participate in the games.

Archery was the most representative and well-known leisure in England. In England, men with excellent physical strength were forced by administration in their territories to practice archery for approximately two hours per day. Godfather in the churches would be asked to monitor the practice. This sports not only stood for superior body strength, but also provided help for potential military events. The kings of England also issued regulations of other extreme sports such as football in order to prevent people disturbed by other distractions. There were a large number of targets made by straw that could be seen in the villages, provided a convenient way for daily practice. In the middle ages, it was obvious that archery were extremely appealing to the British people. From many thousands ago, the longbow had already become the weapon and the key to win battles. From the documents described, the deep meaning of archery was presented clearly. It had deep meaning to the British people, both in the wars and sports contests.

## 2.2 Leisure for intellectual Entertainment

Apart from sports games, intellectual entertainments also attracted a lot of people's interests, chess is one of them. Chess seems to be a board game, but it is actually the epitome of a class. Life in the middle ages is told by the positions on the chess board, the names of chess and the uses of chess. There are literally six different types of roles represented different chess on the chess board. The six distinct pieces on the chessboard represent various aspects of mediaeval life such as some special ceremonies and crude warfares.

Chess was invented in the sixth century in India originally and later been introduced to some regions in the mid-east area. After around approximately four centuries later, it began to infiltrate Europe but was not popular until the First Crusade ended in 1099 [1].

The pawns on the chessboard represent labours and farmers in that time. The number of pawns are the biggest during the games and they are always used as a way of protecting the characters with superior values by sacrificing. Peasants in that times were always regarded as the private property of the owners of a typical land area as well as the agricultural goods. The life of peasants in that times were extremely tough because of the lack of protection and huge amount of farming work [11].

Castles on the chessboard represent houses or shelters and they are also a kind of homes of people in the mediaeval times. In the chess games, they are always two castles in both two sided of players. Apart from houses, there are definitely knights band soldiers in the board games. Horses are the representatives of knights and it is always said that knights are actually much more essential than soldiers. Not only in the games, but also in the real life of medieval times, nobles and people with superior status were protected by knights. The main purpose of setting knights in the chessboard is as the same as soldiers or peasants, only for sacrificing in order to protect the kings and queens if necessary. The most superior character in the chessboard is the king. It represents the power and accesses to all resources during the games. Additionally, it is also the chess pieces on the chessboard that needs to be closely guarded. Originally, the European pieces and boards were identical to that in the Islamic set. The Arabic shah were equivalent to the king in the Europe, horses were epitomes of knights, foot soldiers were pawns. However, the pieces were gradually varied by the Europeans. Initially, the squares on a chessboard were practically the same colour until the thirteenth centuries. Because the same colour might confuse the players, for example they would mix the chess of their own with their opponents then the whole games would be destroyed and became messy. Furthermore, this grid with all pieces in the same colours gave players the illusion that the pieces were always unobstructed on the chessboard, Europeans eventually turned the chessboard into the black-and-white grid that people see in current days [12].

They changed some of the characters in the chessboard as well as their roles and functions, sometimes they would add extra chess pieces to the chessboard if possible. The rules of the game of chess and the moves of the pieces have been standard since their first inception and have been followed. However, the number of chess players was increased to 16 pieces per side later in India. In the eighth century, the Moors of North Africa invaded Persia. With the interweaving of the two cultures, chess became popular among the Moorish soldiers. Since then, the Muslim world with great scientific and cultural achievements began to welcome chess with open arms. As their empire continued to expand, chess was with them from the seventh to the eleventh century. People in the mediaeval times used a square board with size of 10 chess pieces in each side of the board instead of 8 pieces simply in the first few months that chess appeared. The changes were not only in the size of chessboard but also in the rules of the games. All of the evidence revealed that the players in the medieval times were innovative. They were not satisfied with the rules and methods to play that had already existed. Therefore, they preferred to create new games in order to expand the choices of their leisure and entertainments [1][13].

### 3. Conclusion

This paper mainly introduces the content and characteristics of sports and leisure in the Middle Ages through case analysis. Generally speaking, life in the Middle Ages was always regarded as an extreme dichotomy. Because the nobles seem quiet, free and comfortable, while the life of ordinary people is completely opposite. However, the entertainment and leisure enjoyed by all people in the middle ages did not seem to be very different. Apart from some recreational activities that may be used as military training programs, they can enjoy almost all leisure activities they want to try. Because there are always many people arguing whether farmers or ordinary people were busy or idle all day in the middle ages. There is evidence that the farmers at that time were not as busy as we think now. It is said that there were many other entertainment activities, and people could kill time by making some simple entertainment equipment. Although the living standard is very low and difficult, people have not lost hope for the future. They try to find something that can bring them happiness and pleasure. Their attitude towards life and future life is actually positive and optimistic. Due to the lack of historical materials, there are still some deficiencies in this study, which will be further supplemented and improved in the future.

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