

## Sports and Games in the Middle Ages

Medieval sport was an exciting spectator event and, much like today, it drew large crowds. Most sports were enjoyed on Sundays and on feast days when folk did not have to work and were free to pursue leisure activities. Many of the popular sports played in the Middle Ages are the predecessors of modern sports.



### Football

One early form of football, first described in a twelfth-century account of London, was a combination of football and rugby and involved carrying the ball into the goal. Another, 'camp-ball', was played in a large open field, sometimes several miles long, and by an unlimited number of players. Neighbouring villages might take each other on and riots could ensue. Handball, golf and hockey evolved from this game. At this time balls were made of leather and stuffed with either cloth or straw; or pig bladders filled with dried peas were used.



Early forms of football have been played since medieval times.

### Bowling

Bowling was greatly enjoyed in medieval times. There were various forms of the game. Some were like skittles whilst others were similar to boules or petanque. It is thought that marbles was a mini form of bowls developed especially for children.

### Other Sports



This 17th century image of a frozen lake depicts men in the foreground playing kolf with ice skaters behind them.

Caich was a game resembling modern-day racquetball. Players would bounce a ball against a wall using a pole or bat. However, as caich required a specialized ball it was only played in urban settings by people of at least moderate economic standing. Ice skating was a popular winter pastime. Skates were made of sharpened bone attached to wooden boards and skaters used poles to propel themselves. Golf as we know it was first played in Scotland although an earlier form, 'colf', was played in the Low Countries.

## Gambling and Gaming



Board games with counters were a popular pastime in the Middle Ages, especially when combined with gambling.

A number of board games were played throughout the Middle Ages in Scotland. Rihmimiachia (Rithmomachy), Hnefatafl, and Alquerque resembled modern day chess and checkers. Boards were either etched onto stone or made of wood. Pieces could be made of wood, bone, stone, pottery, or ivory depending upon the owner's wealth. Nine Men's Morris was a popular game that resembled tic-tac-toe. The game could be adjusted to accommodate more players or to increase the level of difficulty. Chess became popular in Europe following the First Crusade when returning crusaders brought it back to their courts. It soon became the game of the nobility but later was played also by those of lower rank. Chess reflected the reality of power dynamics at the time and was used for educational purposes to teach logic and

strategy; but it was also enjoyed for leisure. In time the pieces were modified to reflect Western society. Thus the castle replaced the chariot, the bishop the elephant, and the queen the counsellor. Gambling was also an integral part of gaming. Dicing was censured by the Church since it often led to fights and abusive language, and also for its negative associations given that the soldiers threw dice for Christ's clothes at the foot of the Cross.

## Storytelling

Stories were an important part of leisure activity. The literate might read romances and epics but they also enjoyed listening to performances of these works. The oral delivery meant that those who were unable to read and write were also familiar with the characters and tales. A number of these remain popular today, most notably the Arthurian romances that recount the adventures of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, and mention Excalibur and the Holy Grail. In addition to telling stories medieval folk also enjoyed 'flyting'. This was the ritual exchange of insults and was enjoyed by peasants and nobles alike.

While some of these medieval pastimes are familiar to us today, others fall outside our modern concept of recreation. However, we share with our medieval predecessors the need to enjoy leisure alongside labour.

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## Useful Reading

Hall, M A, 2011, 'Playtime Everyday: The Material Culture of Medieval Gaming' in *A History of Everyday Life in Medieval Scotland, 1000-1600*, eds E J Cowan & L Henderson, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh

Ewan, E, 2011, 'Hamperit in ane hony came Sights, Sounds and Smells of a Medieval Town' in *A History of Everyday Life in Medieval Scotland, 1000-1600*, eds E J Cowan & L Henderson, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh

Reeves, C, 1995, *Pleasures and Pastimes in Medieval England*, Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, Stroud.

## Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to Julie Kerr, MA MLitt PhD, at Edinburgh University, for checking our facts and suggesting edits.

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