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**Review Paper**

# SPORTING AND RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF STUDENTS IN THE MEDIEVAL UNIVERSITIES

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**Abstract**. *The medieval universities of Europe were the prototypes for higher education throughout the Western world. The activities of students who attended these institutions provide historical insights into student life in an era before physical education and organized recreation became part of university education. This expository study is based on material derived from the statutes and regulations of the medieval universities, and the few extant journals and diaries of medieval students, which chronicle their sporting and recreational activities.*

*The regulatory attitude of the university masters regarding student sport and recreation is explored within the context of medieval conceptions of education and models of the scholarly life. The intent and success of university regulations is analyzed vis-a-vis the natural inclinations of students. The study describes leisure time activities within an urban environment including holiday festivals and the Sabbath, and discusses unsavory influences such as gambling, drinking and violence which accompanied some forms of sport and recreation. The study concludes by placing student activities within the context of medieval scholasticism and anticipatory to renaissance humanism.*

**Key words**: *medieval, student, university, recreation, sport*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Centuries before universities offered formal instruction in physical education or sponsored organized campus recreation, students participated in a wide variety of sports and recreational activities on their own initiative. Records from the medieval universities of Europe (late 12$^{th}$ through 15$^{th}$ centuries) document these forms of student recreation. While the universities attempted to proscribe and regulate many of these activities, some were tolerated and enforcement of rules was lax. Very few medieval educators actually promoted healthy forms of recreation.

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### 1.1. The Medieval Student

Students in the medieval universities were - with rare exception - exclusively unmarried young men. The term "bachelor" which originally denoted a young scholar, came to imply unmarried status. Generally, these bachelors were somewhat younger than today's college students, especially the arts students who were in their early teens. As a group, medieval students were both socially diverse and cosmopolitan. The universities drew students from every class of society, and most attracted large numbers of foreign students. The scholarly idiom of Latin provided a *lingua franca* that allowed students from different lands to communicate among themselves and their masters, while the local towns people would converse in the vernacular of the area. Notably, these diverse populations didn't always live in harmony. Oxford University warned its students about engaging in odious comparisons of nations, faculties, and nobles to commoners. Foreign students often were resented by the local populace, and bloody "town and gown" riots were not infrequent (Moulin, 1991).

In the northern European universities, students were considered minor clerics. Minor orders didn't require commitment to a clerical career or to celibacy, and allowed the enjoyment of some of the privileges of lay life. However, clerical status did carry behavioral expectations felt to be appropriate to a scholarly life. Notwithstanding the clerical model, the typical medieval student was not an ascetic but rather a robust individual who loved to disport and celebrate life. Indeed, medieval students exploited their protection from civil law conveyed by clerical status in order to engage in boisterous and rowdy exploits in the university towns and then beat hasty retreats to the sanctuary of the university (Overman, 1971).

### 1.2. The Medieval Curriculum

The medieval mind had its roots in the past and was governed by authority. This mindset explains the course of study at medieval universities. Learning experiences were almost entirely theoretical in nature. Books were the source of authority, and relied upon almost exclusively for knowledge. Yet, few students could afford their own books, and lending libraries were rare. The masters lectured from the canon, while students took notes on tablets for the purpose of studying. Periodically, students submitted to oral examinations.

This established curriculum was dominated by Aristotle and changed slightly over the course of the Middle Ages, as classical works were rediscovered. The backbone of the undergraduate curriculum were the seven liberal arts: the *trivium* including grammar, rhetoric and logic, and the *quadrivium* made up of the quantitative disciplines. Lectures, recitations and disputations dominated classroom pedagogy. No experimental sciences or laboratory classes were found in the medieval curriculum. Education of the mind made up the entirety of the experience. Nothing was evident in medieval pedagogy which contemplated education of the body. Generally, the concepts of hygiene and beneficial physical exercise were foreign to the medieval mind (Paetow, 1910).

### 1.3. The Students' World

Medieval universities were located in cities that held charters and enjoyed a degree of autonomy. These cities constituted burgeoning trade centers whose populations were

made up largely of artisans and craftsmen formed into trade guilds. Scholars also organized guilds and entered into contracts with cities to rent halls in which to conduct lectures. These loose assemblies termed *universitatis* were granted charters of their own. At some universities, residential colleges were built to house students and masters. But many students simply found lodging near the lecture halls. The Left Bank of the Seine in Paris became known for harboring university scholars (Pirenne, 1925).

Most students shared crude quarters, on limited incomes. They could afford few clothes and fewer books. Even the price of candles was a factor in the time devoted to study after sundown. Students probably spent much of their leisure time in public places. The universities didn't discourage students from venturing into the city at the end of the school day, as long as they behaved. However, students' presence in the university towns often was problematic. The University of Heidelberg found it necessary to warn students against climbing on the city walls (Moulin, 1991:32).

### 1.4. Student Life

The daily schedule at a medieval university began early in the morning and ran through mid afternoon. On the surface, the daily routine of a student appears rigorous. However, life in the medieval ages was somewhat more relaxed than today and offered a good deal of leisure. There were many religious holidays in addition to Sundays. Universities typically would cancel "ordinary" lectures on holidays. The Universities of Paris and Montpellier observed some 70 holidays during the school year (Rodgers, 1940). The stigma against play on the Sabbath had not yet taken hold in Europe, and students engaged in recreation on this day. Generally, as in any age, serious students spent a good deal of time studying while their less earnest peers enjoyed a rather unregulated life. Students who lived in the residential colleges might be regularly supervised, but those residing in private residences had a great deal of liberty (Rait, 1912).

The model for the student's daily regimen was the *opera scholarium*, which prescribed such practices as washing, dressing, reciting prayers, etc. The prevailing code of conduct allowed students to take walks on Sunday, if these occasions were utilized for discussing lectures or reviewing class notes. But students were admonished not to waste their time or engage in sport "for scorn of the body" (Moulin, 1991).

The regimen of prescribed rituals was supplemented by detailed lists of prohibited activities. The "Manual of the Perfect Student" (1495) illustrates typical regulations found at the close of the medieval era. It directed students not to be outside after 8:00 p.m. in the winter or 9:00 p.m. in the summer, not to play with laymen on Sunday, not to swim or fool around on school days, to sleep during dinner or eat at Verpers, to hit children, to soil their books, to incite disorder, to speak stupidly, sing during formal functions, break tree limbs, or put on comic plays in the churches and cemeteries - the latter often serving as venues for student pranks.

Such lists of proscribed activities were promulgated not only for the purpose of discipline but to assure a climate where students could study in peace. Thus, one finds rules against howling, singing and playing the trumpet. Evidence indicates that at the Universities of Oxford, Florence, and Bologna, a system of spying and informing by fellow students was in place. One university demanded that students must swear to inform without delay on the comrade found drunk in a tavern, taking part in degrading spectacles, or engaged in vicious or lewd conduct (Moulin, 1991:33-34).

An axiom among historians notes that if one wants to learn what individuals were doing at leisure during any period in history, look for evidence of what was regulated. Much of what we know regarding sport and recreation of medieval students is derived from the statues and regulations of the medieval universities, supplemented by a few journals and diaries. A wide range of activities - licit and illicit - pervade these records.

## 2. THEORETICAL ASPECTS THE PROBLEM

### Student Sport and Recreation

Generally, medieval educators remained ambivalent about recreation, while sport carried negative connotations. Some residential colleges encouraged students to recreate for an hour each day, but such unsupervised recreation wasn't organized by the masters. Likewise, universities provided no recreational facilities for students; however, the environs often included greens that were appropriated for sport and play. At medieval Cambridge, a four-and-a-half acre field across the Cam River provided students a place to practice the popular sport of archery (Downs, 1950:49-50). The University of Paris had a plot of land called the *Pre-aux-clercs* which served as a playground, where students played *au crocet* with a curved club like a hockey stick. The younger arts and grammar students at Paris played at spinning tops and marbles as well as other made-up games utilizing nuts and mutton bones. The more rambunctious students engaged in hat throwing contests and a game known as *a la prince morele* in which someone was pinched (tickled?) and tried to keep from laughing (Gabriel, 1955:214-16).

Similar forms of recreation seemed to be common across the continent. In the Spanish universities, the custom was for the students to play ball after breakfast, including a croquet-like game and ninepins. More leisurely forms of recreation included picnics and walks along the river (Reynier, 1902:33, 48, 73). At the German University of Leipzig students played a bowling game where a ball was rolled at a peg or hole in the ground (Seybolt, 1933:42).

Water sports were popular with students who could swim. Students at Paris would dive from the Petite Pont and swim in the Seine during the summers. Likewise, at the University of Heidelberg, students swam in the Neckar despite its strong currents. Bathing was forbidden in the statutes of the Universities of Louvain and Glasgow, probably because of drownings (Rait, 1912:108). Everard Digby, a master of arts at Cambridge, noted the numbers of deaths from drowning among undergraduates at that school and wrote a textbook on the teaching of swimming in the 16$^{th}$ century (Coulton, 1918:411). In the winter, English students would strap horse shin bones to their feet and ice skate on them, often with the aid of a pole shod with iron. The more mischievous boys would strike at each other with the poles as they shot past. Many accidents were reported. A more benign activity was to seat someone atop a cake of ice and pull him over the ice (Holmes, 1952:25).

Football was popular in the northern universities. Students in Scotland seemed to have played the game both before and after it was banned by the Scottish Parliament in 1457. James I had banned the game earlier in 1424 with little effect (Robb, 1912:357). Young men in England also played football. Oxford University forbade its play in the city streets (Moulin, 1991). A 15$^{th}$ century chronicler described the game as one in which participants propel, "a huge ball not by throwing it into the air but by striking and rolling it

along the ground, and that not with their hands but with their feet. The boundaries had been marked. . ." (Magoun, 1929:43). Gambling often accompanied the game, which may suggest a further reason why the authorities discouraged participation by students.

Indeed, gambling appeared to be a popular vice among medieval students. Regulations against the practice existed at universities across Europe, including Cracow, Salamanca, Montpellier, and Oxford (Reynier, 1902:9; Morawski, 1900:241; Anstey, 1868:II, 530). Some universities were more lenient than others in tolerating wagering. At the University of Heidelberg, where regulations were otherwise strict, students were allowed to play cards or checkers for a pint of wine (Gabriel, 1963:24). At the University of Bologna where private gambling was tolerated, students could play dice in their rooms. But the statutes were strict concerning public gambling. At Montpelier, students were allowed to play dice as long as losses remained under two cents and didn't create a distraction (Moulin, 1991:33). Bolognese students were not allowed to enter a gaming house or shoot dice in public (Rashdall, 1936:I, 193). The residential colleges at Bologna were strict with their student lodgers. At the university's college for Spanish students, those caught gambling lost their allowance, and on the third offense, they were expelled (Marti, 1966:336-37).

Characteristic of the times, enforcement was erratic outside the colleges. Accounts exist of students playing dice despite regulations against it (Haskins, 1904:25). Flipping coins is also mentioned as a student pastime. At one university games of chance were tolerated as long as the stakes didn't include silver or the amount wagers did not "exceed the amount of a pint of wine," and that the activity not "reflect badly on the masters or the scholarly community" (Moulin, 1991:31-33).

The Church repeatedly had prohibited clerics from playing chess (Louis IX of France restricted chess to laymen in 1254). Although students in the northern universities held clerical status, the game appears to have been popular among them, and regulations forbidding or allowing its play appear to be erratic. Records show that students in the colleges at Paris and Cambridge played chess (Gabriel, 1955:216; Rashdall, 1936:III, 317). University of Heidelberg forbade students to visit the public chess tables in that city (Rashdall, 1936:III, 421). It's possible that gambling took place at the public games, and as in the case of dice, chess was tolerated as long as the games remained private.

Other games and sports were forbidden or regulated by the universities. Tennis enjoyed a mixed reception. It was forbidden within the precincts of Cambridge in the 15$^{th}$ century, but in the following century Queen's College claimed its own court (Coulton, 1918:67; Downs, 1950:50). Students at the University of Caen who were caught playing tennis were expelled (de Bourmont, 1884:366). In Scotland, where golf became popular early on, university statutes prohibited it as unprofitable, and recommended archery instead (Robb, 1912:357). Oxford University had rules prohibiting students from playing handball (Emden, 1968:204).

Dueling for sport, although quite dangerous, was popular among the bolder students. A blade could be purchased for a few pence, and in virtually every student's room in Spain, one could find a leather jacket, buckler, cross belt, and foil. Swordplay was equally popular among German students. On many a summer evening a group of students would await one another at a corner just to experience the thrill of exchanging a few blows (Reynier, 1902:48-50). What started out as sport often ended in earnest, and the propensity for students to engage in lethal duels caused universities to prohibit this activity. Fencing schools appeared in many university towns, and constituted an encourage-

ment. The University of Heidelberg fined students for visiting these schools (Thorndike, 1944:291).

Hunting and hawking had always been popular among the upper classes in Europe. Students at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland were allowed to go hawking (Robb, 1912:355). Students at Cambridge hunted rabbits and wild birds with a bow and fished for eels in the Cam (Downs, 1950:7). As the estates of the landed gentry were off limits, its not surprising to read that students at Oxford were reprimanded for chasing deer and rabbits (Anstey, 1868:II, 670). Besides, this activity probably didn't fit the ideal of a scholarly life. At University of Leipzig, students talked of catching birds in snares (Seybolt, 1927:26). Students also kept birds as pets; goldfinches were especially popular. Colleges and residential halls were stricter about allowing other pets such as hawks, ferrets, and dogs (Anstey, 1868:I, lxxiv; Gabriel, 1955:170; Emden, 1968:214).

Few organized spectator amusements existed that medieval students were allowed to attend. The joust or tilt was a favorite. These events might last three days. A few students actually participated despite the disapproval of the Church. The danger was obvious; and students had lost their lives jousting. The University of Heidelberg forbade students from attending jousts, under severe penalty; and in 1305, Edward I banned tournaments and jousts in the environs of Oxford as a disturbance to the scholarly life (Seybolt, 1921:89; Leff, 1968:88). Here again, enforcement appeared lax. Students at Leipzig report attending tilting exhibitions. They also frequented exhibitions of boxing and wrestling, as well as going to the circus. On the Iberian peninsula, students frequented the bull fights and circuses (Rashdall, 1936:III, 426; Seybolt, 1927:56).

On the several feast days, students would join in the general celebration. This often consisted of miming and the acting out of religious dramas. On St. Nicholas Day (the patron saint of students), students would put on mystery plays. They would concoct grotesque masks and don outrageous clothing. There would be singing, dancing and parading through the town - and, of course, a great deal of feasting. Much of the behavior during festivals was immodest and vulgar. This was a time to "let your hair down" and disport before returning to the mundane routine of scholarly life (Thorndike, 1944:344). It was probably such bawdy behavior that induced the University of Montpelier to forbid their students from celebrating Carnival (Moulin, 1991:33).

The more refined students liked to recite poems, to play music on the flute, the guitar, the fife or the lute, and sing carols. At Leipzig University in the late 15$^{th}$ century, a ball was organized in which students were allowed to be accompanied by the daughters of the better families in the city (Moulin, 1991: 31-33).

No important event or celebration in the Middle Ages was got through without some drinking. Medieval European society was quite tolerant of drinking, even among the young. Wine and beer were popular drinks. Drinking occurred on campus during festivities, but more occurred off campus. Some 60 taverns are recorded in the neighborhood of the University of Paris in the fourteenth century (Chatelain, 1898). It was quite difficult to retain order in these establishments, and students often got into altercations with the towns people. Universities attempted to regulate student drinking because of the riots that often started in taverns. The University of Bologna restricted drinking to certain days, while a drinking curfew was set by the University of Paris. The University of Leipzig would throw into prison those students who engaged in drunken riots (Overman, 1971:293). As with most forms of behavioral control attempted by the universities, efforts to restrict student drinking were sporadically effective.

Thus, the range of student recreation ran the gamut from innocent forms of play and boisterous celebration to rowdy and dangerous pursuits. In this regard medieval students differed little from university students in the following centuries up to the present. Notably, one finds little evidence of attempts by medieval educators to steer students toward wholesome recreation. Indeed, the concept of positive physical recreation as a corollary to education seemed quite alien. The prevailing mind set was to prohibit or regulate students' recreational activities. For the most part, students followed their own recreational inclinations and attempted to avoid discovery by disproving authorities.

One progressive educator of the late middle ages held a favorable view of bodily exercise and physical recreation. Mafeo Vegio recommended:

> After puberty . . . riding, shooting, slinging, and throwing javelins.
> At school, however, lesser sport . . . leaping, games with balls, but not dice . . .
> [also] reading and talking, walking by streams and wood and the seashore,
> fishing, bird catching . . . (Jarrett, 1926:64).

However, university statutes generally didn't reflect this progressive approach to students' use of leisure. The masters were more inclined to see the negative side of sport and recreation.

## 3. CONCLUSIONS

The Scholastic education of the medieval universities had limited intellectual objectives, and encompassed the Platonic mind-body dualism of the ancient Greeks. This dismissive view toward the physical was reinforced by the centuries-old influence of monastic education that emphasized subjugation of the body. To the medieval educator, the human body was considered a distraction. The resulting antagonism toward participant sports was coupled with a disdain toward spectator sports. Bias toward the latter was derived from the unsavory public games of the ancient Romans. Medieval churchmen associated those spectacles with paganism and excess. It was in this context that the university masters prohibited students from attending public athletic events.

Not until the rise of renaissance humanism in the late 15$^{th}$ and 16$^{th}$ centuries, would educators adopt an integrated view of mind and body. Gradually, this view translated into offering physical education in the schools. In the interim, students acted on their natural impulses to recreate as compensation for and escape from the stilted life a of medieval scholar. Eventually, many of the activities they enjoyed - football, golf, tennis, fencing and dance - would be incorporated into the university curriculum.

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# SPORTSKE I REKREATIVNE AKTIVNOSTI STUDENATA U SREDNJEVEKOVNIM UNIVERZITETIMA

## Steven J. Overman

*Srednjevekovni univerziteti u Evropi bili su prototipovi za visoko obrazovanje kroz zapadni svet. Aktivnosti studenata koji su pohađali ove institucije obezbeđuju istorijski uvid u studentski život u eri pre nego što su fizičko vaspitanje i organizovana rekreacija postali deo univerzitetskog obrazovanja. Ova studija je bazirana na materijalu koji potiče od statuta i pravila srednjevekovnih univerziteta i malo postojećih časopisa i dnevnika srednjevekovnih studenata sa izveštajima njihovih sportskih i rekreativnih aktivnosti.*

*Regulisanje stavova univerzitetskih vaspitača obzirom na sport i rekreaciju je istraživano unutar konteksta srednjevekovnih koncepcija obrazovanja i modela školskog sporta. Namera i uspeh univerzitetskih regulativa je analizirana nasuprot prirodne naklonosti studenata. Istraživanje opisuje aktivnosti u slobodnom vremenu u urbanom okruženju uključujući festivale za vreme raspusta, "Verski dan odmora" i raspravu o nedoličnim uticajima kakve su imale kocka, piće i nasilje koje je pratilo neke forme sporta i rekreacije. U istraživanju se zaključuje o mestu studentskih aktivnosti unutar srednjevekovnog skolasticizma i anticipirajućeg renesansnog humanizma.*

Ključne reči: *srednji vek, studenti, univerziteti, sport, rekreacija*