

The 5th lecture
Sport and body in Middle Ages
**Body in the early Middle Ages. Body in the late Middle Ages. Parallel
between body and sport in Middle Ages. Medieval sport.**

INTRODUCTION

In my country, as well as in almost whole Europe and partly North America, an impact of worshipping the ancient Greek Times has been apparent. This enthrallment has been visible nearly in everything that emerged during the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century. We can find it in official documents as well as in bestsellers. For example, let us listen to some sentences said by Lord Henry – the seductive hero of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

...I believe, cried the Lord Henry, *that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream – I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of medievalism and return to the Hellenic ideal...*

In these sentences we can hear this sense: The middle ages are connected with maladies and the ancient times with full development of human powers. As we will see in next passages, it is the other myth that noticeably influence our ideology of sport.

Owing to fact that the middle ages had no clear conception of sport and sport was packed together with other bodily affairs we should start our inspection of medieval sport by the inspection of conception of body and corporeality.

BODY

We know very well that Christian fathers took a dislike to body and sports (or more exactly: to playing games). But this does not mean that they did not take care of body. If we want to understand their dislikes we have to realize circumstances within which they arose. We should not forget the bloody spectacles of the Romans. We should not forget the decay of the athletic games during their relocation into Roman Empire. And above all we should not forget hectolitres of Christian blood that were shed in the Roman circuses. (Cf. Olivová, pp. 148–158.) Moreover, after the "Constantine's conversion", or more exactly after the growing interrelation between the desire for secular power and the desire for a homogenous Christian faith, the old Roman games and spectacles ceased to be a tool for domination of lower classes and became a menace for a new type of human life control.

However, that all does not mean that Christians were not interested in body. During the whole the medieval era people distinguished between two conceptions of body which were overlapping each other. The first: body as *corpore*, as pure materiality, one of many physical bodies which we can deal with. The second: body as *caro*, as soulful body, as a bridge between the *corpore* and the soul. (Here we can find similarity with Husserl's *Körper* versus *Leib* distinction.) This overlapping allowed body to remain an important part of the redemption theory. In accordance with traditional interpretations of New Testament, The Second Adam (Christ) as the scriptural Word became a body. For Tertullian it is body that is the decisive point of human salvation. Even before

him, Saint Paul had promised that righteous man would be resurrected together with his / her body. (Cf. Schmitt, pp. 812–814.) Since the *caro* was so close to the soul and simultaneously was so close to the *corpore*, body as *corpore* was in the centre of human interests as well as soul was. This is the reason why body was in focus of the thoroughgoing public surveillance. During the Middle Ages we can find a great many orders, instructions, practices which handled and controlled body. Let us mention monastic order's prescripts or the theory of perpetual virginity. At the beginning of the 21st century these ideas may sound strange to us, but all of them prove specific attentive and – in a certain sense – warm interest in body. That is why it is very short-sighted to think that the medieval people dismissed body.

In my view, if there is any period of body oblivion we have to seek it in the Early Modern Times. In this era body lost its previous importance in some sense. Although sensory perception was acknowledged as a one of the sources of human cognition, it was a dubitable source because scholars of this time conceived sensory perception as a bridge over the ontological gap between a cognizing subject and a cognized object. As human experience is always opened to future falsifications, sensory perception produced by body does not satisfy the main requirement of the time, the requirement to achieve absolute, „objective“ certainty in cognition. Therefore, sensory perception, as well as body as a whole started to cease their reputation. *Cogito ergo sum* – I think, thus I am. In the texts, prescripts or literature we can not find nothing similar to statements like: "I feel through my body, thus I am"; or statements: "I control my soul and body, thus I am". Everything, which is connected with activities of body, was covered by mental activities. So, suddenly body became something which was able to be detached entirely from human beings. Body started to be *corpore* only.

In spite of that it was just now said (written) we can see easily that the Catholic Church conceived body primarily as a tool of Satan he used it to seduce man. LeGoff draws our attention to fact that between years 1050 to 1215 AD there occurred three events that strengthen each other and caused a change in the structure of the late medieval society – the first is the Gregorian reform, the second the triumph of the indivisible monogamous model of marriage, and the third is the unification of bodily sins in the category "lustfulness" (*luxuria*). This category was composed from the very different things – starting for instance from gluttony, continuing through narcissism – that means here fixation on one's own body – and leading up to drives and sexual temptations. However, all of these things were closely related to body and to its intractability. By these changes the Catholic Church defined the position of clergy and distinguished it strictly from laics. If priest's carnal restraint had been a matter of personal volition in the previous times, now it became duty for all priests. Suddenly their recantation of carnal delight was taught to be a manifestation of purity of the Church. Thus this conception of human being urged to structure the medieval society in a new way – on the one side there was a smaller group of people that ardently fought for their own purity; on the other there was a bigger group of people that could not satisfy this noble aim and hence, the Church had to invent instruments to control the second group. Only in the period from the 11th to the 13th century homosexuality ceased to be tolerated, the indivisible monogamous relationship started to be the sole model of living together, and laics were subordinated to surveillance of confessions and penitence systems. Let us hear for instance the quotation of a

short passage from an 11th century canonical book of Burchard from Worms – *Decretum* – which was popular among people until the 13. century:

(This citation is always composed from couples transgression and punishment. To spare time from the second transgression the following punishments will be skipped.)

"...Did you copulate with your wife or other woman from behind as a dog? Did you? So you have to penitend for ten days with bread and water ...

Did you have an intercourse with your wife in the time of her period? If you did it, you have to...

Did you copulate with your wife after a child had stirred in her womb...?...

Did you embrace your wife on the Lord's day?...

Did you pollute yourself with your wife in the time of Lent?..." and so on.

Citation according to (LeGoff 2005a, p. 130).

Determination of lustfulness was not only the spiritual tool, but also the powerful tool by which the Catholic Church influenced occidental imagination of body for hundreds years; and we can find many vestiges of the influence in our thoughts and practices. (Cf. LeGoff 2005a, pp. 130–134.)

However, it does not mean that this approach to sexuality, corporeality, and body was the only one in the above mentioned time. Rival approaches that sprang from vitality of living body appeared at that period. Presumably, it is no accident that carnival which preceded the 40-day-long fasting of the Lent, spread out itself and grew stronger in the time of the Gregorian reform (cf. Le Goff, Truong, p. 48). Here it can be seen how the fragile system of the new organization in medieval Europe was arisen from the clash among the intentions of the Catholic Church and the living body energies of commoners that needed to be appeased or canalized and controlled. However, how did these living body energies are expressed or projected into a life at that time?

Jean Verdon points out that the Roman taste for public bathes did not disappear with vanishing of the Roman Empire. In the time of Charles the Great there were spas in all palaces. In the 13th century there existed many prescripts that were set by bath's guilds and that ruled the work in public bathes. With little exaggeration, from these documents we can find that virtuousness appeared to be scarce aspect of these places (cf. Verdon, p. 115–116). Verdon reports on the picture of a spa by Roger van der Weyden:

"[M]en and women get undressed together there and there is promiscuity all over the place. In spacious tubs there are naked pairs whom food is served. The miniature [that is the picture] consists of two parts divided by columns: on the one side of the picture there is the spa; on the other the filled room. An angry old man that entered the room carrying a stick in his hand and looking for his wife, is stopped in the doorway by the owner."

(Verdon, p. 116.)

It may be only a caricature by which the author of the picture wanted to slander bathes, but existence of spas in that time and their closeness to body and to its "dark" side is apparent anyway.

From the mentioned prescripts, texts and pictures we can understand that spas were places where adulteresses (whores) occurred. Prostitution was another type of aberration from official moral frame. There were poems, romances,

prescripts, restrictions, and ordinance circumscribing locations where loose women could carry out their work these artefacts show prostitution as frequent occurrence in the Middle Ages. Both secular and religious power intervened in promiscuity in attempt not to extirpate it, but to rectify it. (Cf. Verdon, p. 121.)

Here some comments on woman and their body in the Middle Ages it should be inserted in this context. The ambiguity of human body – body as a mass of human life's socio-biologic terms and body as a source of temptation and subsequent fall – is projected to woman in some sense. At the beginning of Christian era the church Fathers layed the secon story about the creation of human being over the first story and thus the first one was concealed. The first tells us that humans (Adam and Eve) were created to reflect God:

*“So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.”* (Genesis, 1,27)

As we have just heard, God created His image in both, a man and a women together. The second story (curiously the best-known) tells us that woman was made from Adam's rib.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. (Genesis, 2, 23)

As we just see, according to this passage the woman was created to be an auxiliary of Adam (the Man). The two, in some sense, anthitetic interpretations were the reason for an interpretation according to which there are two women in the beginning of Bible. The first Lillith and the second Eve. Lillith was supposed to betray the God and Adam and she was expelled from Eden, but late Eve succumbed to temptation also. Both stood at the beginning of the Fall. This shift or this extirpation of the first story went hand in hand with a shift in the significancy of the very Fall.

"You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." (Genesis, 2, 16-17)

In the original interpretation which had started in Judaic tradition, the Fall was explicated as pride of man who wanted to know what he could not have know. From the time of Saint Paul we can trace vestages of another interpretation: The Fall was caused by or at least closly related with lust. This second type of interpretation culminated in the Augustine's work and in the 12th century became the foundation stone of the most dangerous sin which was labeled “lust” in that time.

These both shifts influenced the conception of women's status and body. Yet, they influenced their self-interpretation also. Hildegard of Bingen, the most known mystic female of the 13th century, wrote about women:

Woman is weak, she sees in man the person who can get her vigor as Moon gets its vigor from Sun. Therefore, she is subjected to man and she ought to be prepared to serve him.

(Citation according to citation Le Goff, Truong, p. 43)

Christiane Klapish-Zuber makes a remark about it: In the hierarchized world of men and orders men is up and women down. In that Not only metaphorically, but literally also.

When I was collecting materials for my subjects I teach at my home university, I met an article which could supplement this topic. I met a quotation taken from the book of William of Auvergne – the 13th century's Bishop of Paris. In this passage William explained why a woman and her body are more open to extatic states and to invasions of outer spirits (good or demonic) than a man and his body are. And we will see how the interpretation of human being creation influenced conception of the difference between a man and a woman and between male and female body:

...[T]he female sex was created from man for the sake of reproduction and for children. But reproduction is impossible for an abstract spiritual substance... This difference of sex... is therefore a clear sign: good angels only appear in the form of men, and never in female form, as do evil spirits... (Cited according to Caciola, p. 21.)

So, the sexual feature of human body determines, according to the 13th century's educated people, which type of outer spirits can penetrate it. William continued by giving characteristics of female body: It is fundamentally sexual, designated for the demonic, and it is receptive to spiritual impressions, both malign and benign. Next he added that female body is elementally opened. In that time "openness" was meant both, physical and spiritual. Physical "openness" determines spiritual one. Female body has at least one more hole than male body. Furthermore, in that time it was conceived as more perforated than male body – its pores are more spacious. Surface of body was thought to be a boundary of person's inner spirit, therefore, its huger openness enable magnified opportunity to take control over a person (cf. Caciola, p. 23). This might be reason why during the period which we are accustomed to call Renaissance approximately 75 % of witch haunt's victims were women. Italian historian Caciola termed this approach as "cultural common sense" of that time (Caciola, p. 26).

It was demonstrated hopefully what a woman and her body signified in the medieval society. At the same time body was the source of living energy and "evil" temptation and women with their reproductive capability and ability to provide men with gratification were the symbol of body amphiboly. So a holy ascetic and a whore were the extreme points between which the medieval society was arched.

Bathes and loose women (as a synecdoche *part pro toto*) seemed to be a necessary outcomes of the culture of individual responsibilities that started to climax in the 12th century – it is no accident that it is the time when tendency to purify personal life dominated. The emphasis on responsibility urged people to suppress or at least to hide claims of their bodies and the surplus of energies gained by this adjusting needed to be compensated. On the one hand there were prohibitions and commandments. On the other hand there were means of relieving excessive demands. "The yoke of marriage contributes to proliferating of brothels and bathes," closes LeGoff the 3th part of his "The Medieval Imagination".

(LeGoff 2005a, p. 134) I think that the Middle Ages formed an inimitable organization of life that determines who we are – the managing, pathetic individualists who are efficient, but often unknowing of their dark side.

The phenomenon of sports reflects the ambiguity of ours. First and foremost sports have been one of the main tools for desire's compensation. Sports have helped people to rectify surplus of their vigor. At the same time sports have expressed our occidental individualistic nature. This nature was strongly impacted by our Grecian-Judaic-Christian culture whose features – primarily the mentioned emphasis on individual integrity and on individual responsibility – facilitated thoroughgoing differentiation a person from a society. In this uniqueness we probably should see the roots of occidental competitiveness on the one hand and on the other excessive cult of heroes – top level sportsmen for example.

SPORTS

There is an important thing we should not forget when we observe sports. We should see them through the optics of their function in human life. We can discriminate a basic role of sports which has probably accompanied people from their emergence on the surface of our planet. Sports arise wherever some game's rules are set. Sports arise when people are willing to restrict their arbitrariness and their needs. However, game and its choice of it are not arbitrary, because they come out from a specific form of life. We can interfere in a process of modification of game's rules, but it is not arbitrary that we want to or need to play the game.

Let us look for example at the genesis and the evolution of knight tournaments. Tournament as an institution arose in the 11th century only (cf. Verdon, p. 141), but their roots had probably emerged in the 9th century's game which resembles the game of Roman youth. Two groups of armed horsemen were arrayed against each other and then the one group hounded the other, subsequently the roles of the groups were changed. However, in the later time this game was transformed into the similar games named "bohört" (or "bohordicium") and "tjost". "Bohört" was a variance the game when two groups of knights stood against each other. "Tjost" is a solitary variance – only two knights combated. (Cf. Olivová, pp. 182–183.) Afterwards, in the 11th century these variations were integrated to a wider socio-political context. According to recent information on the medieval knighthood there was a need to rectify savagery of military conflicts that grew rapidly after the disintegration of empire of Charles the Great and his successors in the 10th and the 11th century (cf. LeGoff 1999, pp. 588–589). In that time – in the 11th century – the changes demanded a new ideological base for rising class of lower military aristocracy. The ideology which would express itself in practice in that way to relieve violence (cf. LeGoff 1999, p. 592). The practice included a whole scale of goals, athleticism or fitness was one of the most important among them, but alongside other goals as sufficient education (in this time it was meant elements of writing, reading, and counting) or as chivalrousness. Soon tournaments started to fulfil other roles; for instance, it started to replace duels between two knights and their retainers, duels called "ordeal" or "Judgements of God". This is the death-match in which a winner, due to his victory, proved that he had been right and that God stood on his side. (Cf. Olivová, pp. 181–182.)

In the time of enforcement of the ideology the knight "sports" – as any other human activity – started to function as a tool of social differentiation. On the one hand the knight encounters became an inherent counterpart of aristocracy life and that is why knights was included into aristocracy since then, on the other hand since the beginning of the 13th century the lower classes was forbidden to practice these sports. Some historical documents prove that there had existed jousts (encounters) similar to late knight tournaments in the 12th century in which both, aristocrats and burgesses had participated, especially in England. (Cf. Olivová, pp. 240–241.)

Therefore it is clear, that what we can regard as a manifestation of sports activities was strictly embedded into a broad social, psychical and historic context. This complex of motivations, solutions and tense relieving influenced a form of a respective sports activity, but on the other hand subsequently this activity influenced its original context. Let us pay our attention to how tournaments impacted on the medieval society: Origin of chivalrousness, court's style of life in the period from the 11th to the 15th century, cantos of minnesingers and troubadours etc. These mutual determining relations between sports and a milieu which they come from can be seen up to now. Let me remember for example relocation of judo and other Asian martial arts into European context. On the one hand it augmented our sensitivity to another type of life, on the other judo ceased to be a martial art and modify itself into another competitive sport only.

From the superficial point of view that some our historiographers have it seems to be right that in the Middle Ages lower classes had no time to do sports, that sports activities were reserved to aristocracy only and other social classes did not have access to them. Of course, it is right that there wasn't something as leisure time for burghers and peasants. On the other side we should have in mind that in the Middle Ages there was a great number of holly days when people were forbidden to work. We can find out from the statutes of some guilds that some workers had more than 190 days of spare time in a year (cf. Verdon, pp. 15–16). It was a time that they could use, besides their religious duties, to rest and play. There is the one big obstruction which explains why we have had not much information on sports activities of these classes: They did not have their own chroniclers. We are able to learn something about their spare time only from documents such as "Lists of pardon" that are reports of lord's giving or not giving a pardon to somebody who hurted anybody else during playing some game. This obstruction distorts probably our view on medieval sports, because ten to think that medieval sports activities and plays ended very often in death or injury. (Cf. Verdon, pp. 138–140.)

In spite of what have just been said there were a few materials that provide us with better insight into the world of medieval sports and plays. One of the best of them is the report on the life in medieval London written by William Fitz Stephen. The report is the part of a Thomas Beckett biography. The author attempted to bring closer the sourrounding where the bishop Beckett had lived. In compliance with it, games were enjoyed by the 12th century Londoners. In London of that time especially many ball games were played – for instance, "soule", "playng at the pame", "hand ball", "clube", "bandy", "gouff", "bowling", of course "foot ball" etc. In these games we can recognize roots of contemporary sports as tennis, cricket, baseball, hockeyball, voleyball, basketball, polo, rugby, football.

Let us listen to a short citation from Fitz Stephen's book which will show us that doing sports was a usual and favoured thing for the 12th century Londoners:

...After meal all the city youth assemble on the field before the city rampart to attend famous ball games. Pupils of each school as well as almost each craftsman have their own ball. Seniors, fathers of the City ride their horses there to see the games of youth and to become young once again thanks to them ...

(Quotation according to Olivová, p. 238.)

Fitz Stephen further mentioned ship competitions, fights with sticks, riding horse, wrestling, boxing, disciplines resembling knight's tournaments and so on, and so on (cf. Olivová, pp. 236–245).

CONCLUSION

So we can see that the Middle Ages, especially some their apoches, weren't so dark period. People of this time lived, used pleasures of their body and succumbed to superstitions as we do now. The differences are in different superstitions we have. For instance the superstition of body freed from oppression of church's and social commandments. However, this body liberation pressure us to accept a supremacy of body commercialization. We would not understand the Middle Ages corectly, if we do not observe the period as a product of the specific and – in some way – admirable concurrence of the powers – wordly as well as religious. The Church's pressures on living body and on its expressions should be viewed as the important counterpart of mundane one-sidedness. This concurrence enabled the origin of cultural culmination in the 15th century which we have unjustly detached from the Middle Ages and called it "Renaissance".

LIST OF REFERENCES:

- Bible*. [on-line] Gospel Communications Internationall, [cit. 2007 -4-3], accessible on: <http://www.biblegateway.com/>
- Fontana, J. (2001), *Evropa před zrcadlem [Europe In Front of the Mirror]*, Praha: NLN.
- Gueneé, B. (1999), „Dvůr“ [Court], in: LeGoff, J., Schmitt, J. (eds.) (1999), *Encyklopedie středověku [Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages]*, Praha: Vyšehrad, pp. 136–145.
- LeGoff, J. (2005a), *Středověká imaginace [The Medieval Imagination]*, Praha: Argo.
- LeGoff, J. (2005b), *Za jiný středověk [On behalf of Different the Middle Ages]*, Praha: Argo.
- LeGoff, J; (1999) „Rytířství“ [Knighthood], in: LeGoff, J., Schmitt, J. (eds.) (1999), *Encyklopedie středověku [Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages]*, Praha: Vyšehrad, pp. 588–598.
- LeGoff, J., Schmitt, J. (eds.) (1999), *Encyklopedie středověku [Encyclopedia of Middle Ages]*, Praha: Vyšehrad.
- Le Goff, J., Truong, N., *Tělo ve středověké kultuře [Body in the Medieval Culture]*, Praha: Vyšehrad.
- Mehl, J.-M., Hra [Play], in: LeGoff, J., Schmitt, J. (eds.) (1999), *Encyklopedie středověku [Encyclopedia of Middle Ages]*, Praha: Vyšehrad, pp. 195–203.

- Olivová, V. (1979), *Lidé a hry [People and Games]*, Praha: Olympia.
- Schmitt, J. (1999), „Tělo a duše“ [Body and Soul], in: LeGoff, J., Schmitt, J. (eds.) (1999), *Encyklopedie středověku [Encyclopedia of Middle Ages]*, Praha: Vyšehrad, pp.811–812.
- Verdon, J. (2003), *Volný čas ve středověku [Leisure Time in the Middle Ages]*, Praha: Vyšehrad.