

# Sports and Recreations in Thirteenth-Century England: The Evidence of the Eyre and Coroners' Rolls— A Research Note\*

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In an interesting and important article on the connections between medieval English and Flemish ball games Heiner Gillmeister, Chaucerian scholar at the University of Bonn, delineates the various types of evidence an investigator of medieval ball games must use to get a fuller, clearer picture of ball play in the Middle Ages. He notes that legal documents, especially the statutes of English medieval kings and the church's bans on tournaments, contained only sketchy information about the sports that the documents prohibited.<sup>1</sup> But, what about two other types of legal documents, the eyre and coroners' rolls of thirteenth century England? Because Gillmeister's conclusion about the relative lack of utility of medieval legal documents was based primarily on statutes and ecclesiastical prohibitions and excluded eyre and coroners' rolls, I investigated a selection of the latter types to determine if they had any value for the historian of medieval sports.

The public records of medieval English kings, particularly the criminal records known as the rolls of the itinerant justices, have yielded valuable information about many aspects of medieval English life.<sup>2</sup> C.A.F. Meekings, probably the greatest scholar of the English medieval legal records, provided many insights into crime, prosecution, and jurisdiction based on his thorough knowledge of the eyre and coroners' rolls. Indeed, Meekings' articles are models of scholarship and demonstrate what the public records might yield for the interested researcher.<sup>3</sup> Yet, his suggestions about the eyre and coroners' rolls were mainly for criminal, legal, and jurisdictional matters. What will the same records offer the historian of medieval English sports and recreations?

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1. Heiner Gillmeister, "The Flemish Ancestry of Early English Ball Games: The Cumulative Evidence," in *Olympic Scientific Congress: Sport History*, ed. Norbert Mueller and Joachim K. Ruehl (Niedernhausen, 1985), 54.

2. For example, our understanding of the social context of homicide in thirteenth-century England was illuminated by J. B. Given, *Society and Homicide in Thirteenth-Century England* (Palo Alto, 1977).

3. C.A.F. Meekings, *Studies in Thirteenth Century Justice and Administration* (London, 1981).

The following research note presents what has been gleaned about sports, pastimes, and recreations of thirteenth-century people from a representative sample of the public records of medieval England. By sports and recreations we mean any activity engaged in by people that took them outside of their everyday occupational activities. Eyre records for the thirteenth century are quite complete.<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, this note represents only the preliminaries of the exacting task of conducting a systematic analysis of the eyre and coroners' records for evidence about sports and pastimes of medieval England.<sup>5</sup> However, it is hoped that a judicious selection of certain eyre and coroners' rolls can reveal patterns about a variety of sports and pastimes.

The thirteenth century saw an increase in the number of records which had begun in the early Angevin period. Two of the era's important legal records were the rolls of the itinerant justices and the rolls of the coroners. The rolls of the itinerant justices are the transcriptions of royal court cases. They are called eyre rolls from the judges' eyre, or circuit ("a journey"). Coroners' rolls also provide modern investigators with an extensive body of evidence about many spheres of medieval English life.<sup>6</sup> Both the eyre and coroners' rolls provide the modern investigator with an interesting view of the medieval English scene, in particular the world of the peasant.

The peasant's world revolved, as it always had, around the agricultural year. Planting, harrowing, harvesting, and other personal and servile duties which bound the majority of men and women to the soil created the structure of everyday life. The lives of thirteenth-century people revolved around their small communities with which they identified. In these small villages the rituals of life, marriage, child-rearing, crime, diversion, and death unfolded generation after generation. Berkshire, Wiltshire, Yorkshire, and London form the *foci* of this study.<sup>7</sup>

What were the sports or recreation-related cases in the public records of the areas investigated for the thirteenth century? In the eyre and coroners' rolls that were investigated for this note, seventy-four sports or recreation-related cases were discovered. Each of the sports or pastimes found its way into the public records because the sport or pastime was related to the commission of a crime or because the sports activity or recreation resulted in a finding of misadventure by the eyre justices (misadventure is an accidental death; when there was insuffi-

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4. Even the printed sources, on which this note is based, are in significant numbers and are becoming more accessible.

5. J. M. Carter, "The Public Records As Indirect Sources for Medieval Sport: England in the Thirteenth Century," in *Sports and Pastimes of the Middle Ages* (Lanham, Maryland, 1988), 22-28.

6. See, for example, Barbara Hanawalt's recent study, *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1986).

7. *The Roll and Writ File of the Berkshire Eyre of 1248*, ed. M.T. Clanchy (London, 1973); *Crown Pleas of the Wiltshire Eyre, 1249*, ed. C.A.F. Meekings (Devizes, 1961); *Rolls of the Justices in Eyre: Being the Rolls Of Pleas and Assizes (1218-1219)*, ed. Doris M. Stanton (London, 1937); *London Eyre of 1244*, ed. H.M. Cam (London, 1968); *London Eyre of 1276*, ed. Martin Weinbaum (London, 1976); also useful were: *Calender of Coroners' Rolls of the City of London, 1300-1378*, ed. R. R. Sharpe (London, 1913); *Select Cases from the Coroners' Rolls*, ed. Charles Gross (London, 1896); *Munimenta Gildhallae Lomfoniensis*, 3 Vols., ed. H. T. Riley (London, 1859); *Rolls of Highworth Hundred, 1257-1287*, 2 Vols. (Trowbridge, 1966-68); *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275-1306*, ed. R. B. Pugh (Devizes, 1978).

cient evidence to prove that a criminal act had caused death, medieval English justices ruled misadventure: *infortunium*). The seventy-four sports or pastimes can be classified as field sports, sports, or recreations. Field sports included archery, falconry, fishing and hunting, and riding. Sports found in the eyre and coroners' rolls were boxing, swimming, other water-related sports (such as water tilting, an activity where two competitors, each standing in a small boat, would try to knock the other from the boat with a wooden lance), and wrestling. Other recreations that took the individuals away from their occupations might include attending a fair, chess, or ice skating.

A sample case from the London Eyre of 1276 illustrates what might be gleaned from the eyre records:

"David de Bristoll and Juliana wife of Richard le Cordwaner were playing chess together in Richard's house, with several others present; a quarrel arising between them, David struck Juliana in the thigh with a sword, so that she died forthwith. He at once fled and is suspected, so let him be exacted and outlawed. No chattels nor frankpledge because he was a stranger. All the neighbors have died. Because the chamberlain held no enquiry concerning the men who were in the house with David and Juliana when the incident occurred, to judgement on him."<sup>8</sup>

An investigator can learn a great deal about the social context of sports from such an admittedly laconic source, as well as much about the sport itself: 1) the identity of participants in sports or pastimes; 2) the sport or recreation being engaged in; 3) the number of spectators or auxiliary participants; 4) the violence which was related indirectly or directly to the sport or recreation; and, 5) because of the detail of the transcription, how the case was handled by the eyre court and the punishment meted out. In addition, eyre and coroners' rolls did not prohibit sports or recreations like the statutes and ecclesiastical prohibitions did.

What do the public records tell us about the social context of sports and recreations in the thirteenth century? What was the socioeconomic status of sports participants whose sports and pastimes became part of the legal records of the royal courts of medieval England? Participants in most cases were not identified by socio-economic status but by residence. However, the data collected reveal a great variety of occupations. Of the 117 principals named in the eyre and coroners' records used in this study, thirty-one were identified according to occupation (although occupational names do not always indicate one's job, even in thirteenth-century England). A rough statistical summary of the principals named in the records reveals the following: eighty-six peasants, three falconers, one miller, two tailors, three cooks, an unspecified number of monks, one baker, one doctor, one fisherman, one houndsman, one serjeant, one relict, one chaplain, one goldsmith, one huntsman, two servants, one knight, one cordwaner, three clerks, and one tavern owner. Not surprisingly, only one person of noble status was mentioned in these records.<sup>9</sup> In the twelfth

8. *London Eyre of 1276*, 42.

9. *London Eyre of 1276*, case 48 (of all cases recorded). Finding the citation by looking for the case number is much easier than looking for page numbers and is why case numbers have been listed here.

and thirteenth centuries, many ecclesiastics were coming from the ranks of the nobility; however, we can only be sure of the knight's noble status here. Rarely did a nobleman or noblewoman use the royal courts to seek justice in the commission of a crime, most often referring to the justice of a court of peers. All peasant males over the age of twelve were obligated to be in a frankpledge group, a rudimentary type of police/community organization that made the community responsible for the actions of individual members. Noblemen were not obligated to be in frankpledge groups. Their noble status assured their trustworthiness in attending court. The appearance of a knight in the eyre rolls can be explained by the fact that the knight, Bernard, was playing chess with a member of the non-noble classes. The chess match resulted in an argument and the two men began fighting. William of Wendere, the non-noble chess player, wounded the knight. Had the knight wounded the non-noble, chances are the action would not have been in the public records. Not only does the existence of a knight in the public records interest an historian of medieval English legal records, the fact that a member of the knightly class was playing chess with a member of a lower class is, in itself, fascinating for the social historian. Although this one incident is certainly not a pattern of two classes participating in the same sport as competitors, this bit of evidence suggests possibly the lack of real divisions between some members of the knightly class and non-knights.<sup>10</sup>

That a number of ecclesiastics are reported in the eyre and coroners' rolls as having engaged in sports and recreations comes as no surprise. Sports and recreations, as the diverse number of occupations underscores, permeated all walks of life. Thomas Becket was known to have cast an approving eye on falcons and falconry even after he became archbishop.<sup>11</sup> Bishop Odo of Bayeux must certainly have kept in reasonably good physical shape and involved in knightly sports if we are to believe his energetic participation in the Norman Invasion of England, whether or not he actually engaged in combat at the Battle of Hastings. Abbot Samson of Bury St. Edmunds' biographer wrote about the athletic exploits of his master.<sup>12</sup>

Six ecclesiastics were mentioned in the source data, including monks,

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10. Of course, as is well known, probably the best example of medieval sport and social mobility is the story of the twelfth and thirteenth-century knight, William the Marshal, Paul Meyer, ed., *L'Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal: poème français*, (Paris, 1891-1903). I have not found a comparable story of sports and social mobility from the peasantry.

11. John of Salisbury, William of Canterbury, Benedict of Peterborough, Alan of Tewkesbury, Edward Grim, William Fitzstephen, Herbert of Bosham, Guernes of Pont S. Maxence. Anonymous I (the so-called Roger of Pontigny), Anonymous II, and the anonymous chronicler of the Icelandic Saga all attest to Becket's love of sports.

12. H.E. Butler, ed., *The Chronicle of Jocelin Of Brakelond* (London, 1949). 39; although Odo of Bayeux's actual participation in the fighting at Hastings has been challenged in an insightful note by the late M.D. Legge, "Bishop Odo in the Bayeux Tapestry," *Medium Aevum* LVI (1987): 84-85 (my thanks to a *Journal of Sport History* referee for providing me with a copy of Professor Legge's note); arguing equally forcefully and skillfully for Odo's participation in the battle of Hastings are David Bates, "The Character and Career of Odo, Bishop of Bayeux (1049/1050-1097)," *Speculum* 50 (January, 1975): 1-15 and, more recently, David J. Bernstein, *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry* (Chicago, 1986), 141-143. Bernstein has reinforced the idea that the warlike bishop would not have been out of his element in the thick of things at Hastings. Indeed, as Bernstein points out, Odo represented a long tradition of warrior-bishops in the tenth and eleventh centuries who were as much at home on the battlefield as on the cathedra.

chaplains, and clerks. However, the ecclesiastical figure may vary depending on how the term clerk is interpreted. A clerk might be either someone who had taken holy orders or simply someone who could read and write.

While the great majority of recreations discovered in the eyre and coroners' rolls involved adult males, there were some recreations listed in the records participated in by women and children. Nine cases included female participants in sports or pastimes. They were engaged alone in a sport or recreation, against male competitors, or as a member of a male-dominated group. The most detailed description of women involved in sport was a case from the 1276 London Eyre involving Juliana in a chess match (see above, p. 4). Other cases included women boating, swimming, gaming in a tavern, and playing chess.

Five cases involved children participating in sports or recreations. Four of the cases revealed children playing alone; the fifth case involved three children playing together. The data disclosed that the children were engaged in swimming, boating, and what appear to be "children's games" of the variety to be found in Brueghel's later painting, "Children's Games."

Thirty-six of the seventy-four sports or recreation-related cases were recorded in the London eyre courts. This legal evidence supports the biographer William Fitzstephen's description of London as a center of sports activity during the time of Henry II (1154-1189).

We are reminded of Huizinga's insights when we attempt to categorize the sports and recreations of thirteenth-century English peasants: "Ever since words existed for fighting and playing, men have been wont to call war a game."<sup>13</sup> The well-known interpretation that noble sports in medieval society were preparation for war seems to find an ironic converse among the sports and recreations of the medieval English peasantry. Thirty-two of the seventy-four sports-related cases might be termed war-related, either as preparation for war or influenced by war. Boxing, water tilting, archery, and wrestling fall under this category.<sup>14</sup>

Group sports in which there are more than two participants are rare in the documents. In only five cases is there mention of 'group sports or recreations.' The following case from the London Eyre of 1276 is indicative of the description of group sports found in the data:

Richard de Borham with many other people from London went to a wrestling match at Bermundseye outside the city and there wrestled with the men of the prior of Bermundseye. . . .<sup>15</sup>

This particular sporting event between Londoners and men from Bermundseye priory appears to have been a regular event. The two teams are well defined: London citizens versus "the men of the prior of Bermundseye." Although the wrestling match (or matches) may have helped to bond the two diverse groups,

13. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston, 1950).

14. See, for example, J.M. Carter, "The Bayeux Tapestry, Bishop Odo of Bayeux, and the Pastimes of the Medieval Silent Majority," in *Sports and Pastimes of the Middle Ages*. 58-75.

15. *London Eyre of 1276*, case 116 (of all cases); other cases mention groups of two, three, or four, but in only five cases are there well-defined sports or recreational groups.

the eyre scribe reported that Richard de Borham was killed at the match and many Londoners and Bermundseye men were injured in the ensuing fight. Another interesting aspect of this particular case is the competition between what might be two classes of people within thirteenth-century English society.<sup>16</sup> Like the chess match between the knight and the non-knight (see above, p. 169), this piece of evidence, although speculative, suggests the socialization potential of sports and recreations in the thirteenth century.

The researches of Hanawalt, Given, Bellamy, and others underscore the violent tenor of thirteenth and fourteenth-century English society.<sup>17</sup> That sports and recreations resulted in violence also seems to support the violent nature of the period. Why were sports and recreations so violent? The extensive consumption of alcohol was a contributing factor to medieval English sports violence.<sup>18</sup> Both participants and spectators alike consumed great quantities of beer and ale in thirteenth-century England. The records for this study show that drinking often accompanied sporting or recreational activities, by participants as well as spectators. In a case from the Wiltshire Eyre of 1249, William the Chaplain of Malmesbury, Thomas the Goldsmith's son, and Adam and John were betting in a tavern while drinking. A quarrel arose and the tavern owner, Stephen Spillefel, was killed.<sup>19</sup> Another incident of tavern games and drinking resulted in a quarrel and the ultimate death of Martin the Tailor.<sup>20</sup>

Another factor in medieval English sports violence was the continuous presence of weapons.<sup>21</sup> Medieval Englishmen habitually carried weapons. Everyone in agricultural society carried a knife for cutting bread and for use in agricultural chores. Unfortunately for participants in sports and recreations, many did not remove their weapons when they played. The citation of the stabbed football player at Newcastle in 1280, presented first in F. P. Magoun's pioneering article on English medieval football (and later quoted in Magoun's famous *History of Football*) is well known: as David and Henry ran for the ball, they ran against each other and Henry was accidentally stabbed to death with

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16. The phrase "men of the prior of Bermundseye" leaves room for considerable speculation. Were the prior's men the actual monks of the priory, were they lay occupants of the priory, or were they laymen who looked to the prior as temporal overlord? Whatever the answer (and all are plausible), the case is extremely interesting for a number of reasons: 1) there are two identifiable groups (proto-teams?), the "men of the prior of Bermundseye" and men from the city of London; 2) if the Londoners are non-ecclesiastics, which they appear to me to be, and the prior's men are actually monks, then the case implies a sporting event featuring "teams" from two different orders of medieval society. If, however, the "men of the prior" are lay occupants or laymen who look to the prior as temporal overlord, there is still the distinguishing characteristic of place: men from London versus men from Bermundseye Priory. I am indebted to a referee for the *Journal of Sport History* for pointing out his/her knowledge of fifteenth-century Italian monks noted for their wrestling expertise. I am also grateful to a referee for the *Journal of Sport History* who cautioned me about trying to see class distinction where it might not be.

17. Given, *Society and Homicide*, 191-193; see also Barbara Hanawalt, *Crime and Conflict in English Communities, 1300-1348* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1980); John Bellamy, *Crime and Public Order in England in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1973); and J. M. Carter, *Rape in Medieval England: An Historical and Sociological Study* (Lanham, Maryland, 1985).

18. Given, *Society and Homicide*, 189; see also, Gwynn Williams, *Medieval London* (London, 1970); at least eleven of the cases investigated for this research note mention the consumption of alcohol although the number was probably considerably higher.

19. *Wiltshire Eyre of 1249, case number 18.*

20. *London Eyre of 1276, case number 48.*

21. Given, *Society and Homicide*, 187-189.

David's knife.<sup>22</sup> Ten of the sixty-six judgments from the seventy-four sports/recreations- related cases for this study specify that a participant was killed or wounded by another participant who possessed bow and arrows, knives, or staffs. The Wiltshire Eyre of 1249 recorded that, "Two strangers were shooting arrows in sport and one of the arrows hit Alice, the daughter of John, and Alice died."<sup>23</sup>

Surprisingly, there were no references to ball games. I suspect, however, that a more systematic analysis of a larger selection of eyre and coroners' rolls would uncover numerous instances of ball game-related violence.

Although the evidence found in the eyre and coroners' rolls is laconic, the records do bristle with a type of evidence related to sports and recreations. This evidence supports some of the existing studies (especially those of a literary nature) and challenges several arguments of scholars who have concentrated almost solely on fictional literature for their understanding of sports and recreations in medieval societies.

The evidence contained in the legal records of medieval England are valuable for the historian of medieval sports and pastimes. The findings that come from the eyre and coroners' rolls (not to mention what might be extracted from the multiplicity of other legal documents from medieval England) can add considerably to our understanding of medieval English sports and recreations, particularly those of the peasantry (the segment of medieval society of which we still know the least). There are, however, several limitations surrounding the evidence collected in this study. Firstly, each sport or pastime mentioned here was recorded for posterity only because it was related to a criminal offense or to a finding of misadventure. Needless to say, the great number of peasant sports and pastimes probably resulted in more peaceful ends (and many sporting activities that ended in violence were probably unrecorded). Secondly, the eyre and coroners' rolls are more explicit than the legal statutes of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and less prohibitive of sports but, as admitted earlier, shed more light on the social aspects of sports (which is, of course, very useful to the sports historian) than on the sports themselves. So, the evidence in this note is, in itself, a type of evidence that can serve to increase the quantity of information about the relatively little known subject of peasant pastimes in medieval England.

The present research note points to the need for a systematic search and analysis of the eyre and coroners' rolls, particularly the very full run of eyre rolls for the thirteenth century (there are considerably fewer coroners' rolls for the same period), for evidence of sports and recreations. If such a full-length study could yield proportionally what the present research note has produced, then our knowledge of medieval English sports and recreations would be greatly increased.

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22. F. P. Magoun, "Football in Medieval England and in Middle English Literature," *American Historical Review* 35 (1929): 33-45; Magoun followed up his pioneering article with his famous *History of Football: From the Beginnings to 1871* (Bochum-Langendreer: Poppinghaus, 1938).

23. *Wiltshire Eyre of 1249*, case number 349.