

2011

Reconsidering on the Early Types of Football

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Recommended Citation

Giossos Y, Sotiropoulos A, Souglis A, Dafopoulou G. Reconsidering on the Early Types of Football. *Balt J Health Phys Act.* 2011;3(2):129-134. doi: 10.2478/v10131-011-0013-5

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DOI: 10.2478/v10131-011-0013-5

Authors' Contribution:

A – Study Design
B – Data Collection
C – Statistical Analysis
D – Data Interpretation
E – Manuscript Preparation
F – Literature Search
G – Funds Collection

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Key words: history of football, origins of soccer

Abstract

According to certain assumptions, physical activities all over the world from the antiquity until the 19th century can be considered as the historical origins of modern football (soccer). The present study examines whether and to what extent those assumptions hold true. In order to criticize these assumptions, a discussion whether ancient and pre-modern activities can be considered as sports is presented. Then, the morphological movement similarity that those activities have with modern football is examined. Finally, a discussion about to what extent the history of these activities is characterized by a continuous developing progress is undertaken. According to our argument these assumptions cannot be supported because the morphological movement similarity of those activities does not immediately imply their placement in the same category when this category refers to the phenomena of civilization. On the contrary, it is the aim those activities serve and, mostly, the meaning attributed to them that constitute the essential elements that need to be examined before arriving at a conclusion that they belong to the same category of the phenomena of civilization. Thus, physical activities all over the world from the antiquity until the 19th century cannot be considered as the historical origins of the modern football.

Word count: 3220

Tables: -

Figures: -

References: 26

Received: March 2011

Accepted: May 2011

Published: June 2011

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Introduction

It can be argued that ancient games such as the Greek *episkyros*, the Roman *harpastum*, the Chinese *tsu chu*, the Mesoamerican *pok-a-tok*, and the medieval games such as the European *choule*, *calcio*, *mob football*, *Shrovetide football*, *Gaelic football*, the Japanese *kemari*, the Malaysian *sepak raga* and the Australian *marn-grook* are ancestors or relative types of modern football (soccer). This argument constitutes the subject matter of this paper, the aim of which was to discuss it critically. Moreover, there is an assumption that the discussion of this argument is theoretically or scientifically significant because this research hypothesis implies fundamental questions of the science of history, such as, what is defined as the historical root of a phenomenon. For this purpose, firstly, the aforementioned ancient and medieval games are presented. Then, in favor of this perspective, the arguments are analyzed. Finally, those arguments are critically discussed.

The games

The ancient Greek *episkyros* was played around 2000 B.C. In particular, there is a marble relief in the National Museum of Archeology in Athens, which shows an athlete balancing a ball on his thigh. Some historians believe that the athlete demonstrates the football technique of *episkyros* or *ephebike* or *phaininda* to a boy. Information about the *episkyros* is provided by Julius the Pollux, a sophist and teacher of rhetoric. Pollux (130–188 A.D) from Naykrath, Egypt, the teacher of the Roman Emperor Commodus, wrote a dictionary for the attic dialect named *onomasticon*. *Onomasticon* consisted of ten books and included information about the way of life in Ancient Greece. In *onomasticon* there was a vague description of *episkyros*. According to the dictionary, two teams of equal number played *episkyros* and the players of both teams inscribed a line on the ground, which was called *skirus*. This line split the two teams. Players were throwing the ball in order to pass the opponents' "goalpost". Pollux did not provide information either for the kind of the ball or for the rules of this game [1].

In Rome, there was also a ball game, which looks like to contemporary rugby, named *harpastum*. According to the written evidence of the 2nd century A.D, this game was played by the Ancient Greeks at least from the 4th century B.C, and later was adopted by the Romans [2]. However, there is no written evidence about the way *harpastum* was played. As far as we know, two teams played on a rectangular field split by a centerline. Each team had to keep the ball in its own area for as long as it could, while its opponent tried to steal it and get it over to its own side. It seems that it was a difficult and rough game and for this reason soldiers played it in order to maintain their physical fitness [3].

The Chinese *tsu chu* originated in ancient China. According to historical records, aristocrats, soldiers and folks used to play this special kind of kicking game from 2500 B.C. or even earlier. The game's name comes from the word *tsu* that means "the ball which is full" and the word *chu* that means "kicking the ball with a foot". The aim of this game was to kick the ball so as to place it in a hole of approximately 30–40 cm in diameter. The hole was formed by a net hanging between two bamboo sticks that were nine meters above the ground. The players used exclusively their feet and the "goal" was extremely difficult considering the small diameter and the height of the target. Other historical sources refer that the game was part of the army's fitness training program during the Chin Dynasty (255–206 B.C.). Among these historical sources there is a military book from the Han's Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.), which includes information about the ball. According to this, the ball was full of feathers, wrapped by leather. In addition, it seems that there was more than one type of this game [4].

Most of the historical sources refer to Maya's game *pok-a-tok* [5] that was played with a ball. Possibly, *pok-a-tok* has common roots with the Aztek's game named *tlachtli*, Tarasans *querehta*, Zapoteka's *taladzl* and Haiti's *batey* [6], all Mesoamerican tribes. The only available information about *pok-a-tok* comes from wall and religious paintings, as well as from preserved game fields, where this game was played. The oldest game field of *pok-a-tok* dates back from 1600 B.C. This field has the shape of the capital letter I. At the two opposite sides of the field, there were parallel walls nine meters in height. On each of these walls, there were either three hanging saucers or an

engraving ring. The players had to kick an elastic ball no more than 15 cm in diameter on the saucer or in the ring. The ball could be kicked either by knees, hips or elbows. According to some historians, *pok-a-tok* was a game-activity related to Maya's religious rituals and specifically rituals related with human sacrifices [7].

During the medieval times, a game named *choule* or *la soule* was played by the European nobility, especially by the French, on Sundays or on feast days. The aim of the game was to pass a ball to the opponents' goalpost, which was a tree, a wall or a rivulet. The ball symbolized the sun. It was a rough and violent game without definite rules about the use of the hands and the legs [8].

A game named *calcio* or *giuoco del calcio forentino* was played in Italy in the 16th century A.D. [9]. It was played exclusively by aristocrats, every night during the period of the Epiphany and the Lent, in most of the towns north to the Rome. Using their hands and legs two teams of twenty-seven players were trying to pass a ball to the opponents' goalpost, which was a target in the perimeter of a field [10]. The opponents were wearing red or green uniforms and hundreds of spectators were watching the game. *Shrovetide football*, *mob football* and *Gaelic football* were similar to *calcio*. All of these games appeared in the British Isles during the medieval period. Some historians claim that *la soule* derived from the British Isles after the invasion of the Normans and later on was renamed as *Shrovetide football*.

Mob football and *Shrovetide football* were violent and hazardous games and this is the reason why the only existing rule was the prohibition of either the premeditated murder or the manslaughter. These games at their beginning were played by two teams from two neighbouring villages or towns. The goalpost of each team was at the center of each village's square and the aim of each team was to pass the ball to the opponents' goalpost. Players were kicking and carrying the ball using their feet or hands similar to contemporary rugby and less to soccer. There is evidence that many fatal accidents happened and that is the reason why *mob football* was forbidden many times. Some historians assume that *Shrovetide football* is the evolution of *mob football*, while others that both games were simultaneously present in the British Isles [11]. In any case, both of them were part of feasts related to the annual circle of agricultural works such as harvesting. There are also legends concerning the relation between *mob football* and pagan rituals. According to these legends, the ball symbolized the sun moving constantly and providing the earth's fertility and good crops. Whatever the case, it is proved that during the Middle Ages, folks spent time on recreation and leisure that included games during their feasts.

Gaelic football is similar to the contemporary soccer. Its history begins in Ireland in the Middle Ages. *Gaelic football* or Irish *peil gaelach* or *caid* is one of the four traditional Irish games, along with *camogie*, which is hurling played by women, Gaelic handball or Irish *lianhtroid* which looks like contemporary handball and *rounders* or Irish *cluiche corr* which looks like the contemporary softball. The oldest reference regarding *Gaelic football* dates from the 14th century, and it is presented as a violent and hazardous game, which was played outdoors by hundreds of people, almost just as *mob football* [12].

During 300–600 A.D. a game named *kemari* or *kenatt* appeared in Japan. Two teams played, each one consisting of eight players trying to keep the ball in the air using only their feet. The ball was full of sawdust wrapped in deer leather. The field of the game, named *kikutsubo*, was rectangular. Poems and tales about *kemari* say that one of the emperors was a fanatic player of the game and managed to keep the ball in the air for at least one thousand kicks [13].

Malaysian *sepak raga* and Australian *marn-grook* are the last games. *Sepak raga* has been played in Malaysia since 15th century A.C. The players stand in a circle and try to keep the ball in the air by throwing it to one another while using either their legs or any other part of their body, except their hands [14]. Australian *marn-grook* has been played by indigenous Aborigines [15]. It has been played by a vast number of players in large outdoor areas. The players split into two teams either because of their different social status or because they come from different areas. The ball is made from the marsypium of a little Australian animal. The aim of the game is dual: each team has to keep the ball for as long as it can by throwing it with hands and kicking it with legs, as well as to throw the ball higher and far away [16].

The argument and their basic principles

As it is mentioned, there is an argument that all these games constitute early types of modern football. This argument is based on two parameters. The first one concerns the similarity that these games have among them. The second one is based on the view that these games were and are played by people who had some kind of historical or cultural relationship. Based on these two parameters, it can be assumed that modern football derives from ancient Greek *episkyros*. For example, ancient Greeks played *episkyros* kicking a ball similar to the modern one used by British footballers. Furthermore, after the occupation of the Greek cities by the Romans, the game was taken up by the Romans and it was transformed to *harpastum*. Through the Roman conquests, the game was introduced to Mediterranean Europe, the British Isles and the countries beyond the river of Rhine. It appeared once again in medieval France as *la soule* and during the same period, in the British Isles either as *Shrovetide football*, mob football or *Gaelic football*. In addition, ancient Greek civilization influenced all modern European cultures and among them the British one. In supporting the above assumption, one could suggest that *Gaelic football* constitutes an evolution of *Shrovetide football* or *mob football*, which were introduced in England in the 11th century [17].

However, although this may sound rational, it does not mean that it is also true. This is due to two reasons. Firstly, till today, there have not been any historical records, which substantiate the truth of this assumption. For example, little is known about ancient Greek *episkyros* and the Roman *harpastum*. Moreover, even if there was sufficient information, further evidence is required in order to prove the way that the different forms pass from one era to another as well as from one culture to another. The only sufficient information that exists concerns the way modern football was introduced by English tradesmen and/or soldiers in different countries.

However, the main objection against the argument that all these games can be considered as early types and/or “ancestors” of modern football, does not lie in the lack of historical evidence but in two fundamental principles. The first one is whether all of these aforementioned games constitute indeed games as football does. The second one refers to whether there is an evolution that allows these games to be considered continuous.

Early types of football: games or something else?

In a classic study, Bernard Suits, in his attempt to define *what competitive games and sports are*, points out that these should share some common characteristics which are: a) their *goal* (like scoring by passing a ball in a place, etc.), b) their *means* (like balls, goalposts, etc.), c) their *rules* and, finally, d) their *lusory attitude* [18]. In our case, it is doubtful whether some of the aforementioned “games” have indeed a *lusory attitude*. For example, what kind of *lusory attitude* can be argued to exist in Maya’s *pok-a-tok* when players knew that they might lose their heads? Someone could reply to this objection claiming that Maya’s *pok-a-tok* is an exception. Yet, even an assumption of the exception does not solve the problem.

Bernard Suits’ attempt to define *competitive games and sports* on the basis of four common characteristics is helpful but also insufficient. Kosmas Skavantzios expands Schneider’s contradictions on Suits’s definition of *competitive games and sports* [19] and underlines that it is a *formalistic-structural description* [20]. In other words it is a definition of those activities based on their type and structure. Yet, Skavantzios considers that it is not sufficient to define a *phenomenon of civilization* only on the basis of this kind of definition. Those phenomena differ from the natural ones, mostly because they cannot be explained but they should be understood. In order to understand those *phenomena*, it is necessary to define them in their context. That is, a *contextualistic description* is necessary [20], a description that incorporates the social and cultural context in which these “games” appear. The adoption of this kind of description is exemplified in the case of the Chinese *tai-chi-chuan*. According to Suits’ point of view, ancient Chinese martial art *tai-chi-chuan* can be classified as game. Yet, according to Skavantzios’s [20] approach, *tai-chi-chuan*, as a kind of martial art, is a way of life and not only a game for the ancient Chinese. In particular, what Skavantzios actually claims is that all the aforementioned suggested early types of modern football, in fact, cannot be regarded as early types as they constitute formations of cultures with different needs and diverse social functions and at that time they were considered to be activities that had

a different meaning. For instance, according to this view, Maya's *pok-a-tok* was associated with religious doctrines and ceremonies and therefore it cannot be considered as game.

Yet, even Skavantzios's point of view could be challenged on the basis of *structural functionalism*. According to this theoretical model, games represent, at a symbolic level, the society's structure and the codes and values, which people learn and adopt [21]. During the 1960s, the notion that in ancient societies games all over the world functioned in a unified way in order to form a common collective consciousness was formulated. Based on this, it was reasonable to connect ancient games with religious ceremonies. Moreover, according to *structural functionalism* thinkers, games also used the patterns that reveal the fundamental structure of humans at a social level such as competition and classification system in order to preserve dominant social values [22,23]. On this basis, Maya's *pok-a-tok* can be regarded as an early type of modern football.

Unfortunately, social scientists following *structural functionalism*, "fall in a similar trap" as Bernard Suits. Conceptualizing games according to their structure, they define them in a specific way. Presupposing and choosing to emphasize common elements among them (the structural elements), they define games with a *formalistic-structural description* without taking into consideration the meaning that historians attribute to games. Thus, Skavantzios's objection, according to which all games were developed by different cultures and had different meanings holds good.

Historiography and the history of sports

In the context of the *historiographical* tradition, in which the dominant perspective until the 70s was *descriptive historiography*, the historians believed that human history is characterized by an inevitably evolutionary progress [24,25]. According to this tradition, ancient societies were considered as the beginning, while the industrial ones as their evolution. On this basis, historians searched in antiquity to find early types or roots of modern social phenomena. Among these phenomena there were sports and games which, according to this view, have their roots in martial arts (*javelin throwing, chariot races*), in basic human activities (*hunting, riding*), in religious ceremonies (*ancient Olympic Games*) and others. In the course of time and, in particular, in the Middle Ages, ancient games transformed and became activities similar to sports while under the influence of industrial capitalism, these activities evolved into modern sports. The historians who follow this model of *historiography* ask questions like "where", "when" and "by whom".

The objection raised against *descriptive historiography* grounds on two arguments. First, the idea that human progress does exist presupposes a perception of human history that has ended. However, the history of humans has not ended. Furthermore, the history of the 20th century with two great World Wars and the hecatombs of casualties cannot convince anyone that the human spirit places the human history under a continuous progress.

Secondly, as Nancy Struna points out [26], the historians who follow *descriptive historiography* believe that historical records and artifacts exist independently of the historian and, consequently, the construction of the past through these is possible and "true". However, this argument is questionable. Usually, historians select a small period of the past, because it is the only available one. Moreover, when there is sufficient amount of records and artifacts, they choose the most significant ones, according to their beliefs and values. Whatever the case, the point is that, in any case, historians interpret the material. Therefore, the construction of history does not take place on the basis of some objective historical records or artifacts, but on each historian's interpretation. But as historians construct and reconstruct the past, they also construct and reconstruct main concepts such as that of the human progress. In other words, human progress, a theoretical concept that can be used to give meaning to the past, is a construction. As such, it can be considered more as a research question than a verified standpoint. On these grounds, if human progress is questionable, then this holds true for the belief that the roots of modern sports lie in antiquity or that early types of modern sports can be found in ancient times.

Conclusion

In this study, the question whether and to what extent, particular games or *lusory* activities from ancient times till 19th century all over the world can be considered as early types of football was examined. According to our argument this idea cannot be supported because the *morphological* movement similarity of those activities does not immediately imply their placement in the same category when this category refers to the *phenomena of civilization*. On the contrary, it is the aim those activities serve and mostly, the meaning attributed to them that constitute the essential elements that need to be examined before arriving at a conclusion that they belong into the same category of the *phenomena of civilization*. For instance, it is not possible to consider the 100 m foot race of modern times as the evolution of the desperate effort of a pre-historical person running to escape from a lion, nor can gymnastics be considered as an evolution of climbing on a tree.

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