

HIST 223 - Sports and Violence in the Middle Ages

University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of History



Professor: Chris Herde (He/Him) - Email: cherde@wisc.edu

Office: 5222 Mosse Humanities

Office Hours: Tuesday 12:30-2:30pm or by appointment

Lectures: 12:05-12:55 MWF, Mosse Humanities 1221



Source: 16th c German *De Arte Athletica*

Course Information

Credits: 3

Breadth: Humanities

L&S Credit: Counts as Liberal Arts and Science in L&S

Canvas page: <https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/497688>

Instruction Modality: In-person

Level: Intermediate

Explanation of Credit Hours

The credit standard for this 3-credit course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course's learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit or 9 hours per week), which include regularly scheduled meeting times (group seminar meetings of 150 minutes per week), dedicated online time, reading, writing, individual consultations with the instructor, and other student work as described in the syllabus.

Overview

This course examines the role of sport and violence in Europe and the Mediterranean world before the advent of modernity. When we imagine the medieval world, our thoughts invariably turn to scenes of spectacular - and often violent - competition. Whether we think of the majestic pomp of a royal hunt, exhilarating action of a joust or chariot race, or the subtle tension of Robin Hood lining up a shot, we cannot help but draw excitement from a dangerous, high-stakes competition laced with the potential of suddenly breaking out into “real” violence. Throughout this period, one’s participation in or rejection of playful and violent competitions was central in defining cultural categories such as gender, status, and group identity. Students in this class will examine this phenomenon as it appears in the historical sources in comparison and contrast to the modern world. We will discuss what separates “real sports” from violent or wasteful diversions; what it meant to play or watch a sport in a variety of historical contexts; and the ways in which violent medieval sports have been employed to justify modern narratives of racial superiority, progress, and civilization.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Explain the ways in which sports legitimize play and violence in various historical societies.
- Recognize how sports reflect and redefine a society’s understandings of identity, power and the body.
- Identify and critique the presence of sport in narratives of civilization and progress
- Analyze a variety of primary sources both visual and textual
- Express clear and precise historical arguments and critical writing skills.

Course Description

This class will meet as a group for 3 hours each week. Classroom instruction during these meetings will be divided between instructor-led lecture (Monday and Wednesday) and active student

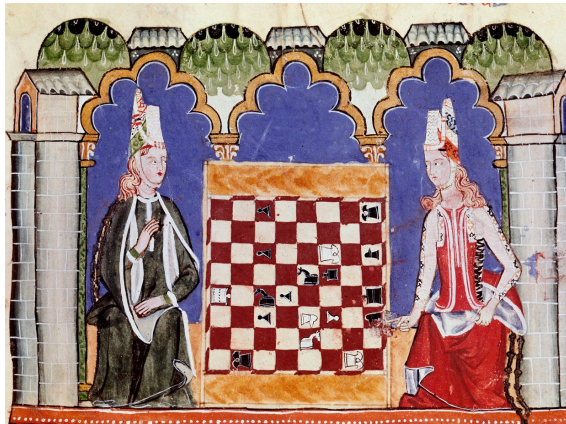
engagement in the form of group discussions and primary source analysis (Friday).



Source: 16th c. Persian *Salaman va Absal*

Course Materials

Students are not required to purchase any books or other materials for this class. All primary and secondary source readings will be made available on Canvas either as PDFs or hyperlinks. Please check the Canvas page early and often for updates to the course or readings.



Source: 13th c Spanish *Libro de los Juegos*

Grading Scale

A = 93-100

AB = 88-92

B = 83-87

BC = 78-82

C = 70-77

D = 60-69

F = <60

Evaluation

These assignments are intended to lead students from critical analysis of individual sources toward synthesis of multiple sources and finally to the construction and elaboration of historical arguments. In addition to grades, students will receive regular feedback on all out-of-class writing assignments.

Attendance and Participation: 15%

Due to the pace of this class, attendance in lectures and active participation in discussions is mandatory.

Reading Quizzes: 10%

There will be one quiz every week (<5 minutes) based on the readings. These simple questions are designed to reinforce key concepts and serve as a starting point for in-class discussions.

Primary Source Responses: 10% (two short papers, 5% each)

Each week, students will have the opportunity to write a short, 100-200 word response post based on that week's reading. Each post should highlight a section of the text and connect it to some aspect of their experience with or understanding of sports. Students need to complete two of these assignments by the end of the semester. They are to be submitted before the end of the week during which the sources were discussed.

Midterm and Final Exams: 15% each

Exams will consist of several ID questions, where students will be given the choice of a list of significant people, places, and concepts from the class and will write a short paragraph identifying the term and explaining its significance. Then they will be given two synthetic questions about the material of the course so far and will answer one of them in the form of a short essay.

Comparative Paper: 35% total

Over the second half of the semester, students will go through the process of writing a 5-7 page paper in which they will compare one of the premodern sports discussed in this class with its modern incarnations. Students may choose to write about the way that a historical sport is

depicted in media, the way it has changed between medieval and modern times, or the ways in which modern practitioners are attempting to revive it.

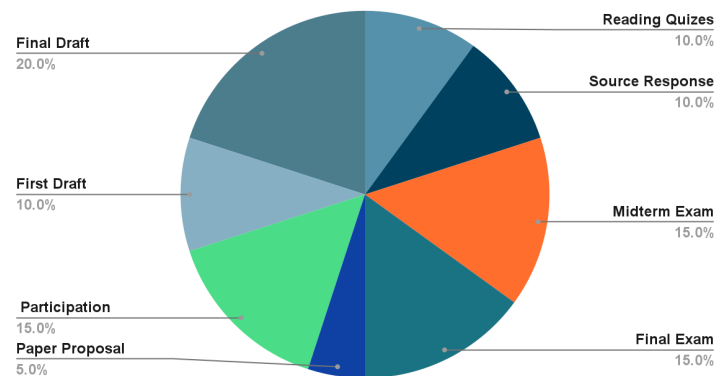
Students will complete this paper in stages, all of which will be graded separately and contribute toward the overall total as follows:

Topic Proposal and Outline: 5%

1st Draft: 10%

Final Draft: 20%

Points scored



Absence Policy:

Attendance and participation are required for every student. If you have an excuse for missing class, **please reach out to me beforehand if possible**. Students who reach out in advance or have a documented excuse will be permitted to make up any missed in-class assignments.

Late Work Policy:

Late work may be accepted without penalty by pre-arrangement in office hours or over email. Failing that, a penalty of 5% per day will be assessed to any late assignment.

Contact Policy:

Please give me **48 hours** to respond to your emails. I will likely respond much sooner than that, but please only send me a reminder email if 48 hours have passed.

Electronic Devices Policy:

You are encouraged to bring a laptop or tablet to class in order to access the primary sources and take notes. I request that you use it only for those purposes so as not to distract yourself or your classmates.

Academic Calendar & Religious Observances:

Establishment of the academic calendar for the University of Wisconsin-Madison falls within the authority of the faculty as set forth in Faculty Policies and Procedures. Construction of the academic calendar is subject to various rules and laws prescribed by the Board of Regents, the Faculty Senate, State of Wisconsin and the federal government. For additional dates and deadlines for students, see the Office of the Registrar's pages. Students are responsible for notifying instructors within the first two weeks of classes about any need for flexibility due to religious observances.

Academic Integrity Statement:

By virtue of enrollment, each student agrees to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin-Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the integrity of the institution. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of disciplinary sanctions include, but are not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension, or expulsion.

AI Policy:

Use of generative AI or LLMS has been shown [to reduce critical thinking skills](#), and as such its use is directly counter to the learning objectives of this course. Students who wish to rely on a machine to think for them certainly do not need a college education to do so. That said, I realize that the appeal of these tools is linked to the incredibly busy schedules with which modern students are saddled and the one-size-fits-all approach implied by traditional higher education. Therefore, **I encourage any student who is concerned that they will not be able to keep up with the course schedule or believes that a given assignment is not well-suited to their personal and professional goals to reach out to me outside of class rather than resorting to genAI. I will meet the good faith of any student in finding a way to modify or replace any assignment with one that will better align with their circumstances and goals while still adhering to this course's educational and statutory requirements.**

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:

The University of Wisconsin-Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy (UW-855) require the university to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities to access and participate in its academic programs and educational services. Faculty and students share responsibility in the accommodation process. Students are expected to inform faculty of their need for instructional accommodations during the beginning of the semester, or as soon as possible after being approved for accommodations. Faculty will work either directly with the student or in coordination with the McBurney Center to provide reasonable instructional and course-related accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.

Course Evaluations:

UW-Madison students have the opportunity to evaluate the courses they are enrolled in and their learning experiences through course evaluations. Most instructors use a digital course evaluation tool. In most instances, students receive an official email two weeks prior to the end of the semester, notifying them that anonymous course evaluations are available. Student

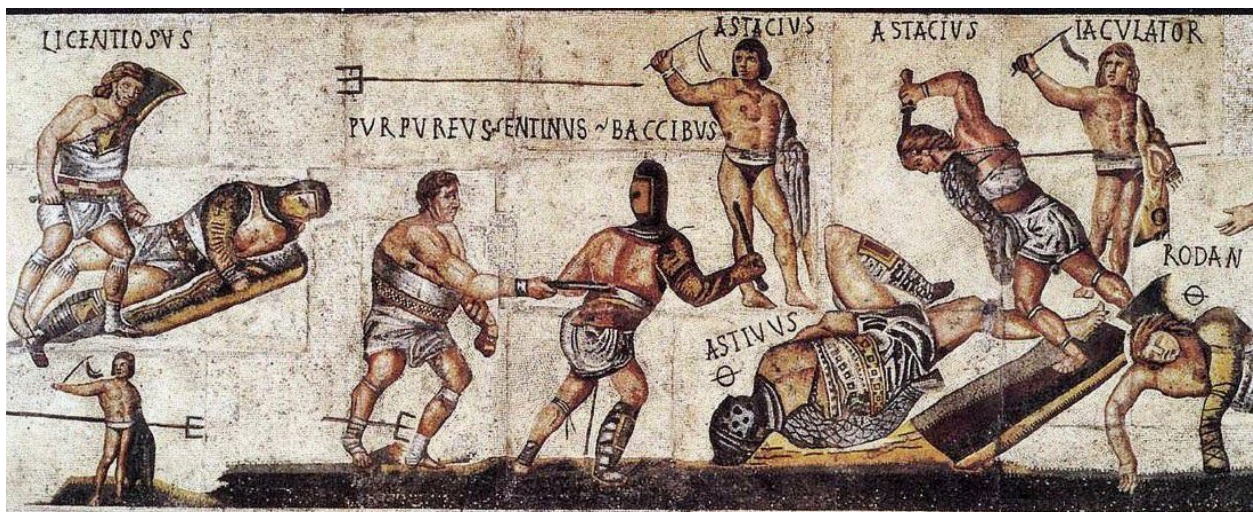
participation is an integral component of course development, and confidential feedback is important. UW-Madison strongly encourages student participation in course evaluations.

Diversity & Inclusion Statement:

Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW-Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. The University of Wisconsin-Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world.

Mental Health and Well-Being Statement:

Students often experience stressors that can impact both their academic experience and personal well-being. These may include mental health concerns, substance misuse, sexual or relationship violence, family circumstances, campus climate, financial matters, among others. Students are encouraged to learn about and utilize UW-Madison's mental health services and/or other resources as needed. Visit uhs.wisc.edu or call University Health Services at (608) 265-5600 to learn more.



Source: 4th c mosaic, now in the Galleria Borghese, Rome

Schedule

Week One - Introduction to Sport and Violence

- Wednesday, Jan 21: Introduction and Syllabus
- Friday, Jan 23: Sports and Violence, Greeks and Romans
 - Readings (to be discussed on Friday):
 - Anna McCullough, "Savage Gladiators vs. Civilized Amateurs: Rome and Athens in American Sports Culture".
- *What constitutes a sport? What makes a sport violent? How do people engage with sports and violence? How have we used narratives of sport and violence and to what ends?*

Week Two - Monotheism and Play I

- Monday, Jan 26: Judaism and Greek Athletics
- Wednesday, Jan 28: Christianity and Roman Games
- Friday, Jan 30: Discussion
 - Readings:
 - Selections from Augustine, *Confessions*
- *How do the Monotheistic and Hellenistic worldviews perceive play and violence? How do different Mediterranean philosophies compare and contrast with one another? What impact does the status and gender of the participants and spectators have on their perception?*

Week Three - Monotheism and Play II

- Monday, Feb 2: Late Antiquity and the End of the Gladiators
- Wednesday, Feb 4: Chariot Racing and Fan Culture
- Friday, Feb 6: Discussion
 - Readings:
 - Selections from John Malalas' *Chronicle*
- *What impact did the rise of Christianity have on the sports culture of the Roman world? What is "Fan Culture" in a premodern context? How does sports celebrity impact wider culture?*

Week Four - Monotheism and Play III

- Monday, Feb 9: Islam and Persian Recreations
- Wednesday, Feb 11: *Lahw* and *Jidd*: Productive Play
- Friday, Feb 13: Discussion
 - Readings:
 - Selections from *Qabusnameh*
- *How are play and violence related in Islamic law? How do medieval Muslims combine pre-existing sports cultures with new faith traditions?*

Week Five - Playing with Authority I

- Monday, Feb 16: Politics and Polo-tics of Equestrian Sports
- Wednesday, Feb 18: The Trial of Chess
- Friday, Feb 20: Discussion
 - Readings (to be discussed on Friday):
 - *Hadith* collections on Chess
- *How do participants and patrons of games benefit from their performance? How do they benefit from spectators and vice versa?*

Week Six - Playing with Authority II

- Monday, Feb 23: Hunting and Kingship in the Middle East
- Wednesday, Feb 25: Hunting and Kingship in Europe
- Friday, Feb 27: Discussion
 - Readings:
 - Selections from Firdowsi, *Shahnameh*
 - Selections from Frederick II, *The Art of Falconry*
- *What role does hunting play in kingship? How is violence against nature related to violence against people? How does geography affect the development and transmission of traditions?*

Week Seven: Playing with Authority III & Midterm

- Monday, March 2: Playing Dice with the Universe
- Wednesday, March 4: Midterm
- Friday, March 6: NO CLASS

Week Eight: - War Games and Chivalry I

- Monday, March 9: Knighthood and Tournaments
- Wednesday, March 11: "Civilizing" the Joust
- Friday, March 13: Discussion
 - Readings:
 - Selections from *Biography of William the Marshal*
- *What is the difference between a play fight and a real fight? How do participants, patrons and spectators compete outside the playing field?*

Week Nine- War Games and Chivalry II

- Monday, March 16: Playing at War
- Wednesday, March 18: Warring at Play
- Friday, March 20: Discussion - **Paper Topic & Outline Due on Canvas!**
 - Readings:
 - Report from the Field of the Cloth of Gold, *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, 303-314
- *How is late medieval masculinity presented in terms of war and peace? How do international sporting events fit into traditions of diplomacy and war?*

Week Ten- Everyone Else Not Sitting on a Cushion I

- Monday, March 23: Peasant Martial Sports
- Wednesday, March 25: "Folk" Games and Ball Games
- Friday, March 27: NO CLASS - I'll be at a conference
- Readings (to be discussed on Monday):
 - *Das Entlebucher Tellenleid*
 - Star Chamber complaints of the 1499 Willenhall Fair
- *How do the elites and their subjects view one another's entertainments? What impact do sports and games have on social and political relationships?*

Week Eleven- Spring Break

Week Twelve- Everyone Else Not Sitting on a Cushion II

- Monday, April 6: From the Street to the Court
- Wednesday, April 8: Playing the *Jeu de Paume*
- Friday, April 10: Discussion - **Paper 1st Draft Due on Canvas!**
 - Readings:
 - Scaino, *Treatise on the Game with the Ball*
 - Galen, *On Exercise with the Small Ball*
- *How did your experience of medieval tennis line up with that described in the sources? How and why does tennis move from being a low- to a high-class sport?*

Week Thirteen- New Worlds of Sport I

- Monday, April 13: The Aztec Ball Game and Colonial Encounters
- Wednesday, April 15: Lacrosse and Colonial Encounters
- Friday, April 17: Discussion
 - Readings:
 - Selections from the *Popol Voh*
- *How do American sporting traditions compare and contrast to those of Eurasia? How do these traditions understand one another once they come into contact?*

Week Fourteen- New Worlds of Sport II

- Monday, April 20: Modernization and Sports
- Wednesday, April 22: Imperial Sports
- Friday, April 24: Discussion
 - Readings:
 - Selections from Cecil Tyndale-Biscoe, *Kashmir in Sunlight and Shade*
- *How do sports change in response to nationalism and industrialization? How do depictions of 'primitive' sports inform and justify new policies about race, gender, and religion?*

Week Fifteen- Memory & Final

- Monday, April 27: Re-creating Recreation
- Wednesday, April 29: Review and Catch Up for Papers and Final
- Friday, May 1: Final Exam
 - Readings:
 - None
- *What are the differing motivations for the reconstruction of historical sports? How and why do we consistently return to certain images of the Middle Ages?*

Friday, May 8

- Final Draft of Paper Due
 - Note that this deadline **is non-negotiable**.