

Women in Medieval Sport

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Sport is more popular today than at any other time in history when judged by the record attendance at athletic events, the huge revenues generated by sporting contests, the high salaries paid to top professionals, the intense competitions to own athletic teams and the passionate campaigns to stage international games such as the Olympics. The effects of this pervasive cultural activity demands the attention of professional historians, especially in the area of gender relationships.

The presence of women's sports have received wide recognition in recent years. But the role of women in a predominantly male domain of sport is not confined to the twentieth century. In fact women participated in ancient sports, and some scholars of the history of sport have written about these women. On the subject of women in sport in the Middle Ages, however, few scholars have studied this topic. The study of women in sport requires our attention if for no other reason than it helps us to understand gender relationships in past civilizations and cultures.

For the past several years I have been collecting medieval images of women in manuscript illuminations and church sculptures. I was struck by the quantity of scenes in which women were physically engaged in sporting activities. My definition of sport in this regard is a term that applies to games, play, pastimes, and recreational amusements. I am aware that the modern definition of sport would not take these activities into consideration but the idea of a physical contest requiring highly-trained athletes in an organized competition is, with the exception of the tournament, rarely to be found in the Middle Ages. While the modern definition of the word sport cannot be applied to physical activities done for amusement in the Middle Ages, it is still possible to forge a concept about sport and use it to aid in understanding the roles of women in this past time period.

My paper establishes that women did engage actively in sport such as ball games, bowling, skating, skiing, dancing, gymnastics, archery, riding, and hunting during the Middle Ages. In trying to determine gender relationships in past societies, historians of women's history attempt to weigh the roles of men and women. If women were barred from engaging in specific activities it tells us about the status of women in that particular society. But if it can be established that women participated in activities that seemed to be the domain of men, such as sport, then we can conclude that such a society was more egalitarian in the area of gender relationships.