



## SPORTS LODGES IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to provide information about sports lodges (tekkes) which provided food, shelter, training and protection to athletes within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Sports lodges were facilities that fulfilled similar functions as do today's sports clubs. They played an important role in training not only famous athletes of the time (especially wrestlers and archers) but also soldiers for the army. To this end, numerous sports lodges were opened within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Some of the most important ones were in Bursa, İstanbul, Edirne and Manisa. Especially the wrestling and archery lodges opened in Istanbul were recorded in Ottoman registers.

**Keywords:** Sports Lodges, Wrestling Lodges, Archery Lodges, Archery Court (Okmeydanı)

### INTRODUCTION

The Ottoman Empire attached great importance to sports and encouraged the establishment of facilities for the development and spread of sporting activities. The fact that sports were considered to be preparation for war accelerated the pace of the establishment of such facilities. The more training athletes get, the more successful they become, therefore, sports lodges were important training centers for athletes.

#### 1. Formation of Sports Lodges

Wherever the Ottoman Empire conquered, it had sports lodges established there. This trend was more commonly observed during the early period of expansion of the Empire. Especially healthy and sturdy young people in the conquered lands were gathered in sports lodges and trained to become successful athletes (Bilge, 2191). In the Ottoman Empire, sports played an important role in social life and athletes were held in high regard. Therefore, sports lodges were opened throughout the Ottoman land. As Yıldız (1979:154) states, sports lodges fulfilled the same functions as today's sports clubs.

Athletes in sports lodges were trained by their coaches as is the case in today's sports clubs. Those sports lodges also had soup kitchens to feed their athletes. Fişek (1985:39) states that although sports lodges were the first

organizational structures in the field of sports in the Ottoman Empire and that they operated with a contemporary understanding of sports club management, they were even far beyond the sports club management of today, especially in terms of social security. As Fişek points out, today's sports clubs do not have a social security perspective. Athletes accommodated in sports lodges were trained based on fair play

Sports lodges not only provided food and accommodation to athletes but also exercised control over their social lives and activity patterns. In fact, athletes followed a strict diet regulated by experts (Çelik – Bulgu, 2010:140), which is an indication of the importance attached to athletes by sports lodges because deciding on what food they should consume requires a different set of skills and expertise.

Sports lodges were responsible for the spread of sports and training of athletes. However, they were not opened everywhere. The main criteria were settlement properties and population. The costs of the best athletes in settlements with low population density were met by villagers who resided in those settlements. However, sports lodges in settlements with high population density, and hence, a larger number of athletes were funded by waqfs, which encouraged sports activities and supported athletes through their own means (Fişek, 1985:31-32). The lack of sports lodges in some settlements might be due to financial constraints and administrative concerns regarding the possible empowerment of local structures that might impinge on the discretionary control of the central government.

Some of the athletes trained in sports lodges were recruited into military service (Seyhan, 131) to make the army stronger. This is a result of the general trend in Turkish culture which perceives physical education activities as preparation for war. These athletes fought in wars, and both archers and horse riders achieved great success.

Sports lodges were built in densely populated settlements with a large number of athletes. The next step was their funding. To this end, two types of lodges emerged depending on the style of establishment. The first type was the sports lodges established by sultans. If a sultan had a sports lodge established, then the expenses of that lodge were covered from the revenues of a waqf (foundation) established by that sultan and the account of the lodge was audited by Evkafi Haremeyn Nezareti (Ministry of Foundations) under the supervision of Darüssaade Ağası (Chief Harem Eunuch). The second type was the sports lodges established and funded by private waqfs. The accounts of these sports lodges were audited by kadıs (Muslim Judges) (Kahraman, 1989:3).

Sports lodges appear to have a structure similar to that of religious lodges in general. For example, after the construction of a sports lodge was completed, the next step was to find someone to manage it. He had to prove himself worthy of this job and even had to be the best athlete in his specialty. The presidents of sports lodges were referred to as “sheikhs” (Dever, 2010:58). However, that title has nothing to do with the title “sheikh” which refers to the elder of a tribe or an Islamic scholar. Athletes in sports lodges were practicing frequently on their skills throughout the year and taking lessons, especially ethics, at other times. In other words, the main focus of sports lodges was sports, which differentiated them from religious lodges.

As stated above, sports activities carried out in sports lodges were not throughout the year. As Muallim Cevdet quotes from the last archery sheikh, Ahmed Efendi, one of the sports lodges opened on the sixth day of May and stayed open for six months. In addition to sheikhs, sports lodges also had referees called havacılar, who were responsible for supervising the athletes, giving them tests and encouraging them (Kazıcı, 1982:32). In this way, athletes had the opportunity to take lessons from experts to improve their skills and earn the title “athlete of the lodge”

## **2. Sports lodges**

Sports have an important place in Turkish culture. The Turks have, throughout history, performed all kinds of sports. They have, however, always been especially more interested and successful in wrestling and archery. In the Ottoman Empire, it was again mostly wrestling and archery that drew greater interest, and therefore, sports lodges were often referred to as wrestling lodges or archery lodges. It should, however, be kept in mind that other sports branches were also encouraged and performed in those lodges. In other words, the expertise of the athletes of those lodges were not limited to certain branches of sports, but they were full-fledged athletes who were capable of performing all kinds of sports very well.

### **2.1. Archery Lodges**

Archery, which has an important place in Turkish culture, played a significant role in wars. Legend has it that archery dates back to Adam and Eve. As Ayanoğlu (1974:16) states, Adam pleaded with God for help with crows were destroying his crops and the Archangel Gabriel came down from Heaven and gave him a bow and arrows to kill the crows.

The heavenly aspect of the bow and arrow makes them more important, especially in Turkish culture. The Turks regard them as sacred and swearing on them as a serious oath (Güven, 1992:96).

Archery, which became highly developed in the Ottoman Empire period, had been one of the most popular sports branches, which resulted in the establishment of archery lodges throughout the Empire.

The most important archery lodge established in the Ottoman Empire was the one in Okmeydanı (Archery Court). Mehmet II had his otağ (tent) erected in Okmeydanı during the conquest of Istanbul and endowed that land to archers after the conquest. During the reign of Bayezid II, Mehmed II's son and successor, a full-fledged lodge was established there and called archery lodge (Erkal,1992:87). The archery lodge in Okmeydanı was established through endowment.

According to Halim Baki Kunter (1938: 8), a prominent figure in Turkish sports history, the archery lodge in Okmeydanı, Istanbul, had existed for five centuries, and there, archers shot arrows, and milestones were erected for those who broke records.

The archery lodge in Okmeydanı had been designed as a complex and further developed over time. Kunter (1944: 149) describes the structures in the archery lodge as follows: Hünkâr Köşkü (Sultan's House), meydan odası

(yard room), mosque, shrine, sheik's office, mathabs (first examination places, kitchens), service rooms, toilets, qasr door, main door, guard door, pulpit sofa and archers' cemetery. Apart from these, the archery lodge also had wide, flat fields for target practices. The 14 wide fields of the archery lodge indicate that it was a very large structure.

However, the main lodge consisted of two parts, which were the yard hearth and coffee room. There were a bow and arrows hanging on one of the walls of the yard room, which was furnished with cushions (Pakalın, 1993:722). The lodge athletes spent a great deal of their time chatting with each other in that room.

Öztelli (1976:48) states that the archery lodge also had a library and a museum, which makes the lodge a more important facility, because the fact that a sports lodge established in the 14th century had a library and a museum indicates the importance attached to sports in that era.

When archers came to the lodge, they abluted and performed prayer. After the prayer, they grabbed their bows and arrows from their lockers and went to the square for practice. Especially archers who would participate in war were raised in this square. Therefore, it was considered sacred and no archers were allowed to shoot arrows there without ablution (Gültekin, 2000:26). All in all, we can state that archery nourished especially by religious norms and values has always had a special place in Turkish culture.

The archery lodge also had a record book in which archers' names and scores were kept. In order to rank in archery, archers were supposed to be able to shoot targets set at least 900 gez (594 meters) away. (Yıldız, 1979:156). There were also some archers who could shoot targets set 1000 gez and 1100 gez away. Milestones were erected for those who broke records, and their names and records were written on them. Some of those milestones have survived until today.

The archery lodge was not only a place for archers but also a field of contest for all athletes engaged in different types of sports. It was a facility where archers shot arrows, wrestlers wrestled, and foot races and horse races were held (Atabeyoğlu, 1991:17). However, the archery lodge lost its former importance and functionality especially during the decline of the Ottoman Empire.



Figure 1: Archery Lodge Illustrated

## 2.2. Wrestling Lodges

Wrestling has a very important place in Turkish culture and dates back to 5 millennia ago according to Kahraman (1989: 2). According to records, Turks were engaged in wrestling in 3.000 B.C. Wrestling became an integral part of social life and was performed in various rituals such as the man defeating his bride-to-be in wrestling (Güven, 1992:31), organizing wrestling competitions at the graves of brave men on their death anniversary (Gümüş,1989:5-6) and wrestling to predict the outcome of possible wars (Harmandalı, 2004:14)

Having penetrated into all areas of our culture, wrestling has always received much interest as a sport, and wrestlers have always been highly respected.

The first sports lodge in the Ottoman Empire was a wrestling lodge opened in Bursa after its conquest. The lodge was established with the order of Nilüfer Hatun, Orhan Bey's wife. She endowed an open space to wrestlers and a wrestling lodge was established there. (Güven, 1992:38 – Kahraman, 1989:2). This wrestling lodge was established through endowment, and therefore, it was funded by a waqf founded also by Nilüfer Hatun.

The second wrestling lodge opened in the Ottoman Empire was the one in Edirne. It was established by Murat I after he conquered Edirne. Wrestlers in the Edirne wrestling lodge practiced twice a week. They practiced wrestling in the lodge on rainy and winter days and in the Namazgâh Ovası (open space for prayer) when the weather was fine (Tayga, 1990:79). Also known as Pehlivan Cemaleddin Lodge, the Edirne wrestling lodge was located inside the Balıkpazarı (Fish market) gate near Ali Paşa Bazaar (Yıldız, 1979:200). It belonged to, and therefore, was funded by the state, which is an indication of the importance the Ottoman Empire attached to sports.

Wrestlers in the Edirne wrestling lodge used to practice throughout the year. However, apart from wrestling, athletes practiced archery, javelin throw and horse-riding as well (Bilge, 1994:2192).

The first wrestling lodges in the borders of the Empire were established where central authority was present. This was an effort undertaken by the Ottoman authorities to exercise control over the management of sports within the borders of the Empire.

The third and fourth wrestling lodges were the Pehlivan Şüca and Pehlivan Demir lodges opened up in Istanbul. The Pehlivan Şüca lodge was opened up after the conquest of Istanbul and funded by the state (Bilge, 1994: 2196). It was located near Küçük Pazar (Small Bazaar), opposite Servi Bakery on the way to Unkapanı (Kahraman,1989:9). The Pehlivan Demir Lodge located in Zeyrek Yokuşu (Zeyrek Slope) was one of the biggest wrestling lodges in the Ottoman Empire. It was also opened up and funded by the state (Bilge,1994: 2194-2196).

The fifth wrestling lodge opened in the Ottoman Empire was the one in Manisa. According to Atif Kahraman, a Turkish sports historian (1989: 38-39), the Manisa wrestling lodge opened during the reign of Murat II was located near the Muslim cemetery near Kurşunlu Shrine.

There was a significant increase in the number of wrestling lodges after the conquest of Istanbul by Mehmed

II. There were wrestling lodges opened up in Mecca, Jeddah, Alexandria, Lazkiye, Damascus, Maras, Amasya, Tokat, Edirne, Ankara, Kütahya, Tire, Bergama, Manisa, Akhisar, Yenice, Skopje, Gallipoli, Diyarbakir, Konya, Bursa, Balıkesir, Urfa, Aleppo, Baghdad and Egypt (Çumralıgil, 1999:338). However, there is not much information about the all these sports lodges, except for the ones already addressed in this study

Having been spaces that once shaped and guided sports, sports lodges lost their significance after a certain period of time and disappeared due to indifference and neglect, indicating that sports were pushed into the background.

## CONCLUSION

Sports have always had an important place in Turkish culture and been regarded as preparation for war. The emphasis was, therefore, on physical education and training young people to be good athletes who also excel in war. The Ottoman Empire aimed to define the boundaries of sports and exercise authority over them, which resulted in the establishment of sports lodges.

Sports lodges provided food, shelter, protection and facilities for athletes. Having the opportunity to do exercises together with master instructors, lodge athletes excelled in more than one sport.

Sports lodges emerged with the establishment of the Ottoman Empire. Their golden era was during the reign of Mehmet II and Bayezid II. During that period, there was an increase in the number of sports lodges and the number of people engaged in sports.

There were two types of sports lodges; wrestling and archery lodges. However, these lodges also provided means and facilities for those engaged in other branches of sports. They operated as large complexes, and therefore, laid the foundations of today's sports activities and facilities. They provided not only physical training but also accommodation, food, education and a small income for their athletes.

Sports lodges played a very active role, especially during the rise of the Ottoman Empire. However, they lost their prominence and functionality as sports facilities and started to be referred to as "the lodge of the sluggard" during the period of stagnation. They fell gradually into decay, and finally ceased to exist.

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