

# THE GAME OF "PILOTA"

WE KNOW FOR CERTAIN THAT THE GAME OF "PILOTA" APPEARED IN THE PAÍS VALENCIÀ AT THE TIME OF THE KINGDOM OF VALENCIA, THE SOCIETY OF THE CHRISTIAN EUROPEAN NOBILITY, WITH ITS CHIVALROUS CULTURE AND SOPHISTICATED GAMES



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TONI MOLLÀ JOURNALIST

**T**he few researchers who have shown interest in the game of *Pilota* have realized that, as is the case with all popular culture, we Valencians have no claim to a patent. Our most immediate cultural context, the context in which any analysis must be placed, is Western Europe, that is to say, Christian Europe. Here we can find more common elements than differences. Unless, of course, we decide to look for the "narcissism of the little difference" that Freud speaks of.

In fact, the Valencian game of *Pilota* is part of a cultural legacy, the traditions inherited from a great jig-saw puzzle of races that are as old and as worthy as our own: the mosaic of *our* civilization. It will not be necessary, then, to lose our-

selves in the magic of the distant past to find glorious references to the sport or to justify the fact that every Saturday we wait for the thrill of Eusebio's *dau*, Josep Maria's *bot de braç* or Genoves's astoundingly beautiful style, or that every Saturday we wait to bet a thousand pesetas on the reds (everyone is free to do as he likes).

But please allow me my learned amusement. The earliest mythological references appear in the legend of Giges, king of Lydia; there are the rhythmic hexametres of Homer's *Odyssey*; there are the epigrams of Martial's *Apophoreta*. All full of hints for those who search for pure and sacred origins. In fact, in Martial, our bookworms have found the ancestry of the most popular

forms of the modern game of *Pilota*: *raspall* (*harpestum*) and the *Joc de Llargues* (*pila trigonalis*).

What we can be sure of, though, is that the game of *Pilota* appeared in the *País Valencià* at the time of the Kingdom of Valencia, the society of the Christian European nobility, with its chivalrous culture and sophisticated games. In fact, *Pilota* was an aristocratic amusement before it became a typically popular game, in the same way that the *Jeu de Paume* in France and Tennis in England were the daily entertainment of their respective nobilities.

Furthermore, the *Jeu de Paume*, Tennis, and the *Joc de Pilota* originated as variations of the same game, a game which shows more similarities than dif-



ferences up to the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, that is to say, so long as these countries preserved their respective agricultural and village structures: until the arrival of what is generally known as *modernization*: the change from a traditional society to a modern, urban, industrial, service society which, in some places, was its death sentence, and in others, the beginning of a lengthy agony. But the characteristics of the game are very similar, both when played in the open air and when played in a special building or court.

Whether we call it tennis, *jeu de paume*, *galotxa*, *raspall*, or *escala i corda*, the players are situated opposite each other, face to face. The scoring follows a sexagesimal system, that is to say, the same system by which time is measured: the unit is the game and the fractions are the fifteens or points (fifteen, thirty, *val* and *joc*). If the ball is hit with the hand, it is made of leather, and if a bat or racket is used, the ball is made of something more "modern". The Basque version of the game was invented at the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, until then, *llargues* was also played in the Basque Country.

Also, the fact that the English game (tennis) is still noble and "refined" is due to the historical role of the British aristocracy which, unlike the French aristocracy, for example, entered the modern age as a leading, *national* class. We should not forget that after the Revolution the French nobility became a reactionary class. Some *Jeu de Paume*

buildings in Paris were destroyed in 1789 because of their associations with the *Ancien Régime*.

In the *País Valencià*, *Pilota* has not survived through any "loyalty" to tradition so much as through the historical inertia that preserved the country as the rural, village society that the first Joan Fuster drew, right up to the sixties of this century. In fact, in the *País Valencià*, industrialization, urbanization and the growth of the service sector did not take place until fairly recently and is now going on at a headlong pace.

There are many different ways of playing hand *Pilota*. However, the most popular indoor forms at the moment are *escala i corda* and *raspall*.

The chief open-air forms are *galotxa* and also *raspall*.

*Raspall* is considered to be the oldest form and is now living a real heyday, both in terms of public and the quality of new players. It is played in the regions of Safor, Vall d'Albaida, Costera and Marina. The *el Zurdo* court, in Gandia, is its cathedral. The towns of Oliva and el Genovés are breeding grounds for young *Pilota* players. El Genovés, with 2,000 inhabitants, has more than 25 professional players in the *raspall* and *corda i escala* specialities. This is a result of the appearance of Francesc Cabanes—el Genovés, to give him his sporting name—unquestionably the best Valencian *pilotari* ever, the idol of the courts, the modern exponent of the oldest game, the only white-trousered *pilotari*.

You may think this is overdoing things a bit. Never mind. Faced with the stand-

ardization of games and sports, of traditions and heroes, of models for *collective imitation*, as Marc Horkheimer called them, to have a local champion, someone who is private, *different*, a little hero who *lives in Valencian*, is a luxury which gives us a right to say things as they are. Little heroes, always within reach, unlike television idols, become human, lose that stench of state bureaucracy that computer designed idols have. I am certainly not attracted by great idols, neither am I in favour of myths—even *national* ones—, but if we have to have them, it will always be preferable to honour el Genovés than to worship Maradona.

Sarasol, Pigat and Oltra are leading figures of the Genovés school, of the town and the master.

Others are Fredi, Puchol, Mezquita and the great Eusebio, who, at the age of 45, is still the best *braquetada* of the country's courts. Of the *mitgers*, or mid-field players, Josep Maria and Xatet II stand out amongst the experienced players, and Oñate II, Perele, Bartual, Sarasol II and others amongst the new figures.

Finally, if you ever want to know what the *Joc de Pilota* consists of, there are matches at Sagunt on Mondays, at Massamagrell on Tuesdays, at Sagunt and Bétera on Wednesdays, at Pelaio on Thursdays, at Sagunt and Gandia on Fridays, at Pelaio and Gandia on Saturdays and at Benidorm on Sundays. And any day in any street in any Valencian town. Just one piece of advice: have a good look at the colour of the players' waist bands. And listen out for the signal: Gentlemen, which way shall we serve? ●