

# On The Anarchist Origins of Golf

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Languages:

SKT = Sanskrit

OE = Old English

ME = Middle English

ON = Old Norse

OHG = Old High German

MLG = Middle Low German

MSW = Middle Swedish

DA = Danish

SW = Swedish

No one is certain where the game of golf originally came from, nor where the English word golf came from. Perhaps this mystery will never be solved with any certainty; but it's intriguing to look at the prehistory of the world from which golf came. By prehistory is meant not hunters and gatherers, but any evidence that precedes urbanization and literacy, which is when we began making written records of our activities. Such evidence comes from prehistoric agriculture, herding and foraging. There are a few golf-like words in the older languages of Europe that have to do with farming or weapons, and the evidence of these words from the primitive northern countryside for some reason is a place no one has yet looked for clues regarding the mystery of golf's origins.

Although golf's popularity has waned in recent years, losing millions of players, its abuse of land, water-use and chemicals continues on a world-wide scale according to the World Anti-Golf Movement. The multi-billion dollar industry has introduced an insignificant number of organic courses to address the criticism of golf's impact on the environment, and one can note a degree of panic when larger pizza-sized holes on the greens are being considered to increase its appeal.

Professional golf's corporate-sized tournament purses and exorbitant greens fees, its feigned air of exclusivity and aristocracy, are ignored by most people. Corporations always seem to patch things up, as they probably will until twenty billion consumers are living in glass bubbles, eating genetically-enhanced foods, breathing purified air and lusting after ever fresher spectacles.

The usual etymology of the word golf is not really relevant to our search for golf's origins. We actually know very little about the word. The earliest use of the word in English literature is from 1457. Early spelling rules were lax and loose and in its early uses the word was spelled in myriad

ways. Literacy and urbanization arrive on the scene together. Before commercial printing began in the 1500s literacy had little purpose beyond churches, courts and commerce. Golf was spelled golf, goff, gouff, gowff, goiff, gowff, “this last,” says the venerable 1929 *Britannica*, “the genuine old pronunciation.” The *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* has gouf, golfe, golf, gould, goufe, gouff(e), gowf, gowff(e), gofe, goofe, goif(f), and states, as do most authorities, that the word’s origin is “probably Dutch *kolf*, ‘the club used in a game similar to golf.’”

The ultimate sources of the word golf remain a mystery. Scholars say that it is a word of “obscure origin.” They have looked at two angles. The first, previously mentioned, is Dutch *kolf*, ‘club’, cognate with Danish *kolbe*, ‘butt’, and German *kolbe*, ‘rifle butt’, words that also used to mean ‘club’ (Old Norse *kölfr*, ‘club’), but the games played with such clubs have not been directly related to the game of golf, even though the game’s Dutch connection is supported by “many pictures and other witnesses”— but, states the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “none of the Dutch games have been convincingly identified with golf, nor is it certain that *kolf* was ever used to denote the game as well as the implement.” Additional difficulty is caused by the absence of any Scottish forms of the word with an initial C or K as found on the Continent, and by the fact that golf is mentioned much earlier in Scotland than any of the Dutch sports that resemble it.

The second angle looked at relates to a word found in some modern Scandinavian dialects: *gowf*, ‘a blow with the open hand’, also its verb, ‘to strike’. *Gowf* also meant ‘blow’ or ‘hit’ in the Scottish Lowlands, mutating in theory from gouff or gowf to goff and finally golf. Alas we have no proof in literature, no actual literary references, and therefore an etymological dead end for golf, or so we are told.

What we know about golf’s history can be put into a few bullets:

One: Early games like golf were played in the lowlands of present day Holland, Saxony, Scandinavia, Scotland and the like. (There was regular commerce between these areas by sea and they shared Germanic languages.)

Two: An old Roman game called *paganica* may have been played in Britain, Holland, Belgium and France with a bent stick and a ball stuffed with wool. It may have contributed to the Gaelic games of hurling and shinny which became modern field hockey.

Three: The Belgians and French also played a golf-like game in the fields called *choulla* or *chole* with clubs with iron heads and egg-shaped balls carved from beechwood. The game featured gambling and its object was to use the fewest strokes to hit a target.

Four: The English played a game called cambuca with a club and wooden ball as early as the 1300s. The word cambuca may derive from cambrel or gambrel, a word of Celtic origin referring to a bent stick; or may somehow be related to the gambo of Monmouthshire dialect, a wheel-less sled used to bring in hay at harvest time. The French also struck wooden and feather-stuffed balls toward target-stumps or posts, scoring with the fewest strokes: *Jeu de mail* was played on a small field similar to croquet. There is also evidence of a Chinese game from more than twelve centuries ago that was very much like golf; such golf-like games may be found world-wide.

Five: The historians Peter Dobereiner and Steven Van Hengel both describe the Dutch game *kolf* being played on a 25’ X 60’ ice court, and write that *kolf* was preceded by a game called *colf*, which was played on the ice in winter and on the land in summer. *Colf* was much older than *kolf*, being played between the 1200s and the 1600s with a course at the village of Loenenann de Vecht having four golf-type holes as early before 1300.

Six: The early Dutch phrase spel metten colve [‘game played with a club’] may be evidence of the word *colf* later becoming *kolf* [‘club’], but this is uncertain. What we know for sure is that

golf became the subject of paintings and of illustrations in valuable books. The Dutch game *het kolven* is probably what we see as three golfers putting at a hole in the turf using clubs with metal heads in the illuminated *Book of Hours*, which was made at Bruges in the 1500s and today can be seen at the British Museum. This illustration is said to be the oldest rendering of modern golf being played into a cup in the turf. Nothing about this interesting evidence, however, helps us to know where golf comes from.

By the 1400s golf was already popular among Scotland's upper classes, but it was played by common people as well, as it still is in Scotland today. The three clubs playing today over the ancient King's Links golf course in Aberdeen, for instance, all entertain the membership of ordinary working-class Aberdonians: the Bon Accord (founded 1872), the Northern (1897) and the Caledonian (1899). All three have clubhouses with cozy kitchens across the street from King's Links. But there are also exclusive clubs in Aberdeen which cater to the better-heeled, the Royal Aberdeen Golf Club, the site of this year's Open (which played initially on King's Links before moving in 1888 to its own private venue north of the River Don), Murcar Links Golf Club, one of Scotland's highest-ranked courses, and the ultra-expensive Trump International Golf Links, built recently by Donald Trump in spite of popular local opposition.

King's Links, incidentally, makes a strong case for being the world's earliest-documented golf course. It lies between the University of Aberdeen campus in Old Aberdeen and the North Sea beaches. In the Aberdeen Council records of 1565 is found the earliest dated reference anywhere in the world to a golf hole. Also in 1625 a local Aberdeen record discusses some military exercises "in the principal parts of the links betwixt the first hole and the Quenis hole." Some think "Quenis hole" may be a reference to a quarry pit, but others believe it would have been disrespectful of Queen Elizabeth (who died in 1603) to name a quarry pit after her, and the words "the first hole" really admits of no other interpretation than the first hole of a golf course. All this squabbling is about events which are relatively recent when compared with the great reaches of prehistoric time in which golf must have had its true origins.

The commoners of the late Middle Ages were the backbone of the local army, common farmers conscripted since the Dark Ages to serve for no more than forty days so that they could return home regularly to tend their fields and herds. These fighting farmers were the "yeomanry," the common bowmen as opposed to the armored knights and thanes. The early archer's bow was made from yew wood, in legend the source of the word yeoman, and a broad disarming of the yeomanry and their replacement by a state army took place between the 1500s and 1700s. Golf's popularity in the 1400s was such that it was interfering with the more important "weapons-showings" that entailed weekly archery practice, commoners included, after church services.

"Fute ball" [early Scottish soccer] was banned in 1424 because it was interfering with archery practice. In March of 1457 the 13th Scottish Parliament of James II decreed that weapons-showings be held by both lay and church lords and barons four times each year, and that the two most popular pastimes, football and golf, in their words, be utterly cried down and not used, [in Scots: "...decreted and ordained that wapinsshawingis be halden be the lordis and baronis spiritual and temporal, four times in the zeir; and that the fut bal ande golf be vtterly cryit doune ande nocht usit."] This Act required that "bow-marks" be made at each parish church "on a pair of butts, and shooting [archery] be practiced every Sunday." Such censorship of golf as frivolous continued for the next 200 years. Royalty was given no exemption: Legend has it that in 1502 Mary Queen of Scots was rebuked for playing golf at Seton House too soon after the death of her husband Lord Darnley. At Aberdeen, historically Scotland's most conservative city,

an injunction was passed as late as 1604 to prevent people from participating in golf and lawn bowling on Sundays.

Scholarship requires precise evidence. Every proof of the etymology of a word requires literary references and exact spellings. Literacy was rare in the 1400s and early literature, as we have seen with the word golf, had an extraordinary flexibility in spelling. Many sounds are similar enough to substitute one letter for another, using pairs of interchangeable letters. For instance,

The interchangeable letters K and G would change kolf (or colf) to golf.

The interchangeable letters W and F would change gowf to golf.

The interchangeable letters V and F would change golv to golf.

The interchangeable letters A and L would change goaf to golf.

The exercise we are proposing is not facetious: Associated with ancient agriculture and weaponry were several words that have these pairs of letters, but unfortunately, without references in literature to prove their case, looking at them won't prove anything from a linguistic perspective regarding golf's origins. In the spirit of the flexibility of language, however, particularly of prehistoric human orality, which was the kind of language that preceded our written tongue, we will take license with these pairs of letters and let the reader draw his or her own conclusions.

- The origins of golf were out on the farm and not in town. It is a well-known statistic that in 1600 over 90% of northern Europe's population lived on farms, and by 1850 upwards of 90% lived in large towns and cities (T. M. Devine, Vol. 1, 1988. By 1900 57% of Scotland's population, to give an instance, had been shifted into towns of 5000 or more [Flynn, Cambridge 1994]). In 1600 only Poland, Austria-Bohemia, Scandinavia and Ireland were more rural than Scotland: Scandinavia had 1.4% of its people living in cities of 10,000 or more, Poland 0.4%, Ireland less than 0.1%. If a standard of 1,000 inhabitants instead of 10,000 had been used in these studies, the percentages would be even further decreased—and people who live in towns of 1,000 can hardly be considered farmers—meaning that several countries in Europe in 1600 had 99% of their people living on farms.

However it evolved, by 1700 certain forms of golf had urbanized. Children's golf courses were built in Elizabethan towns where men could play only if accompanied by a child. The earliest British golf portraits show tony children playing with customized small clubs. These paintings date from only three or four centuries ago, while the origin and prehistory of golf, the broader subject of our inquiry, relate to customs that are older than the scant evidence we have of well-heeled Scotsmen and Dutchmen and their posh children in and around their big towns.

Golf may have developed among shepherds or farmers on long summer days, perhaps as contests based upon the slinging and slapping of various staffs and tools, shepherds' crooks, flails and so on. The slinging of the hay-maker's scythe, with its fluid and whip-like sideways motion, is similar to the swing of the golf club, and there are also other tools and weapons that may have a linguistic connection with golf. We will look at several early farming and foraging practices in some detail.

Before towns and cities people lived in an open landscape and spent most of their year outside, occupying the kind of land that pertains to our inquiry—land that was open enough to allow for a golf-type shot—and this requires some clarification. Some open land of this sort in early England and Scotland was cleared of plant life by customary burnings, other open land was cleared by the reaping of grain or hay, and other land by the grazing of animals. The small farmer and the small herder were preceded, two or three millennia before, by the small forager who lived by wilder

means, a primitive subsistence garden-farmer or herder who gathered from the wild a substantial portion of the year's food.

After the notorious enclosures of the commons and the clearings of the peasant populations from the woods and fields of Scotland and England between 1600 and 1800 (the cause of the dramatic shift of population we noted earlier), the peasantry was moved into towns to work in mills, or forced to emigrate abroad. When wool became England and Scotland's main export product, great commercial "sheep-walks" were created with a single shepherd overseeing commercial herds where once dozens of small clans grazed their smaller flocks. Huge grain farms also dominated the landscape as wheat became a major export crop. (It was at this time that the wily poacher entered English and Scottish folklore as the bane of the rich farmer.) Open fields—open enough to allow for a golf shot—were not new, however. Smaller open-land configurations preceded these large farms by hundreds, even thousands of years, the open lands of prehistory.

The landscape words of Scotland and England don't tell us much about golf. The only kind of land traditionally associated with golf is linksland, typically sandy open land along the seashore, but why, or even whether, it has any connection to golf is uncertain. A word link (OE *hlinc*) in Old English meant a bank or hill, and these hills were often planted in grain or hay, as were other kinds of land like moors and downs and braes. The *Scottish National Dictionary* defines a link specifically as 'a sandy knoll or a stretch of sandy, grass-covered land near the seashore, a golf course', a definition that suits our modern use of the word but which by a more ancient measure would be confusing or even captious. It is true that linksland today is the traditional setting for the oldest golf courses, gently rolling, low lying sand-dune land abutting the sea. These golf courses were always found near commercial towns that were sited by ocean harbors, and this mercantile factor was probably the reason linksland came to be associated with the seashore. Perhaps the source of Modern English link as land is misunderstood, because it is usually thought to come from the Old Norse word for a link in a chain (ON *hlekk*, cognate with the Old English word for link)—as if the golf holes link together like chain links—but linksland seems more likely to have come from Old English *hlinc*, which meant simply 'ridge, bank, rising ground, hill'.

Many older sorts of landscapes would have been open for at least part of the year. The moors, or muirs, were generally a kind of peat land. In Scotland the old heather was burned off the common grazing lands in annual muirburns to let the young shoots sprout. The naturally regenerating grasses after the burn are called in Scotland *naitur gerss* ("nature grass"). These young plants served two purposes: The first was to provide food for the herds of ewes or cows that typically moved with their small human clans each year from lowlands to highlands in a pattern of migration known as transhumance. The special flavors of highland cheeses is still today said to come from these young plants. The second purpose was to feed and hide the moorhens, as they were known, a variety of small birds that were an important secondary food source hunted and gathered by the locals. Were it not for the young plants that sprouted after the burnings, the grouse and partridge and other birds would not return to nest and live in the moors. The old "pagan burnings of the heath" were eventually outlawed by aristocratic landlords, and only much later, in the twentieth century, were they restored by environmental authorities as annual controlled burnings to protect the moorfowl.

Moors, even when found in hilly country, are sometimes wetlands, but the low muddy lands near the rivers and the sea called fenlands are more consistently boggy. Fens are usually low-lying marsh not suitable for games like golf. Low hills, often along the sea, called downs, (a variant of our word sand-dune, ME *doun*, OE *dun*, 'hill'), were perfectly good golf-shot land, as it were.

Other hills were called braes, which could be a declivity or a slope or a knoll, a word said to be related to Old Norse bra, cognate with our word eyebrow: As our brow slopes, so do the braes, typically as hills along highland rivers. Scottish braemen lived on the slopes of the hills, and on the tops, at the braeheads, are found the great cairns, piles of stone raised up in prehistoric times in memory of the hallows, as the ancestors were called.

What is important to our inquiry is that the annual mowing of cereal grains or hay created open expanses of land, whether the land was braes, moors, downs, links or something else. The agricultural use of hay, for instance, was unknown before the domestication of animals, which began only four or five millennia ago in northern Europe. Domestic animals were not kept and fed over the winter, so hay was not cut and cured to feed them. Hay (OE *hæg*) is grass that is mowed and cured for fodder (fodder = ‘food for animals’). The early barn was called a hay-house, and the scythe a hay-scythe (OE *hæghûs*, *hægsîðe*). Early migratory herders who travelled to warmer pastures in the winter must have laid up smaller amounts of hay to feed their small herds during the months of snow and extreme cold. Such prehistoric hay was wild hay, simply the local wild grass; but the hay of the last few centuries, which is more nutritious, is wild hay combined with Timothy and its mixtures, alfalfa, clover, miscellaneous hybrids like bluegrass, redtop and Johnson, annual legumes like soybeans, cowpeas and vetches, and grains, like oats and wheat, cut before maturity.

Hay was cut with a scythe and laid up in windrows, which were long rows left on the ground to dry in the sun and wind. Later the windrows were turned to help them dry, and then gathered together and lifted into hayricks, that were also turned to expose the hay to the sun. Then the hayrick was piled onto a hay-wain or hay-wagon, which was in its primitive form simply two ladders set atilt a plank on two wheels and pulled by a horse or ox to the hay-house or barnyard. This work was all about survival: Without storing hay for the winter a herder or dairyman could not keep his herd alive. It took five cartloads of hay per cow to feed a cow through five English winter months.

An inventory of the stored hay was taken in the fall, and any beasts in excess of the amount of hay on hand were slaughtered and salted for meat for the winter, because, obviously, they would have died anyway. The annual sacrifice of these animals in pre-Christian times was dedicated, according to the eighth-century English historian Bede, to the pagan spirits at Blot-month, approximating our November (OE *blotmonath*, blot = ‘sacrifice’) with feasts and festivities, the relict of which is Martimas, beginning on November 11th. St. Martin’s Day remained a day of great feasting until relatively recent times.

In the East Anglian dialect of English *goaf* (found also as Danish *gulve*) meant to stack or store hay or grain on the floor of the barn. There are many old uses of this word in English, as early as 1325 (*Oxford English Dictionary*, to “*golv* the corn,” with our interchangeable letters, “*golf* the corn”), and in the 1400s spelled “*golvyn*” or “*golvon*,” (“*golfing* the hay”). East Anglia is an area in England of Scandinavian settlement. As we will see, this is part of a broad pattern of golf-sounding words associated with harvests and hunting in the Nordic and Low German languages.

The growing and cutting and storing of hay for the winter is an agricultural custom known as hay-making. Primitive hay-making has three steps, 1. mow, 2. make, and 3. carry, so hay-making can refer either to the custom of growing and using hay, or refer to its second step. The first step, discussed earlier, is mowing, when hay is laid out in windrows, either by the mowers or by a horse- or ox-pulled hay-rake that gathers the hay into heavier windrows. Mowing referred also

to the harvest of barley or oats or wheat or rye. The old word mow (OE mûga), did not mean ‘to cut’, but meant ‘a heap of grain’ in the sense of our word golv. Mowing is a common verb in the West Germanic languages (OE mâwan, MLG meien, DA maaïen, prehistoric Germanic mê, ‘to cut down grass, corn etc., as with a scythe’, cognate with our words mead and meadow); but mow is a Scandinavian noun (OE mûga, ON mûge, SW muga, ‘swath, crowd of people’). The place the haycock or hayrick stood was called the mowstead. In Old Norse ‘common people’ or ‘country folk’ were called “all-mow” (ON almûge, MSW almoghe, SW allmoge, DA almue). Mow came to mean in Modern English two things, 1. ‘a stack of hay, corn, peas, beans etc., or a heap of such in a barn’; and 2. ‘a place in a barn where hay or corn is heaped up’. This distinction is important for our study because we find that the word golf also related to a heap of hay and to the place in the barn where it sat.

The second step, making, is found in our often-used expression “Make hay while the sun shines.” Rain is the enemy of hay-making. A Scottish proverb says “May makes the hay.” Hay-making is described in the English nursery rhyme Willie Boy, Willie Boy:

*Willie boy, Willie boy  
Where are you going?  
Oh let us go with you  
This sunshiny day.*

*I’m going to the meadow  
To see them a-mowing,  
I’m going to help the girls  
Turn the new hay.*

Making requires that the hay be piled up into ricks or pikes or cocks or trampcocks or stocks, as they are variously called, where it goes through a preliminary sweating. Any round pile of hay in the field was a haycock, and the purpose of this sweating was to further dry the hay. The haystacks ferment if the moisture is not sweated away, causing the internal temperature of the hay to rise and possibly ignite, even explosively, burning the hay and maybe the hay-house too. The haycock is mentioned, of course, in our English nursery rhyme Little Boy Blue:

*Little Boy Blue, come blow your horn,  
The sheep’s in the meadow, the cow’s in the corn;  
Where is the little boy who looks after the sheep?  
He’s under the haycock, fast asleep.*

The third step in making hay is carrying, and, as noted earlier, this was called a hay-golph or hay-goaf. Ricks of hay were carried from the fields to their winter storage areas. The ricks were lifted onto wagons by means of big levers called rick-lifters, and the wagons sometimes had extender platforms on them called hay-racks. In the end a wagon came down the lane behind a horse or an ox, a poetic “great toppling wain of hay” that was a joyous sight in ancient days. At the homestead the hay was either put into the barn to get it out of the weather, or it was built into a giant haycock that sat on its own mowstead, as its traditional place was called; it was thatched over to keep it dry in the winter. Some haycocks rose as high as three stories. They were dismantled through the winter in a way that kept it from falling apart, cutting into the cone from the side. This custom kept the hay dry all winter without the use of a barn.

The final “golf” custom was that of stacking the hay on sections of the barn floor, or “golving the hay,” as mentioned earlier. The Old Norse word for floor is, no surprise, golf, spelled precisely

the same as Modern English golf, and this word remains as Swedish golv and Danish golv, which also mean 'floor'. In the hay-barn the golf or mow was the place where the hay or grain was stored. More precisely, this bay in the barn stretched from one vertical post in the wall to the next, and a single mowing of hay was limited to one hay-golf. Also the mowing or carrying was called a hay-goaf or hay-golph. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes:

Where horses or barns were constructed with a wooden framework [i.e., "post and beam" or the more primitive "cruck" framing] the upright posts were placed at regular intervals along each side, the space between two posts forming a 'bay', and the size of the building was frequently given by stating the number of bays it contained. Each of these divisions is in the Scandinavian language called a 'floor' [golf], note staff-golf, Icelandic stafgólf, from stafr, 'post'. As late as 1450 'Reek or golf' and 'golfe or stak' are given in English associating the word golf with the hay-rick and the stake-posts of the barn.

The hay or corn that was deposited between two posts was a golf, as in 1530, "Goulfe of corne, so much as may lye between two postes, otherwise a baye." Corn, of course, means 'grain' in Britain, like wheat, barley, oats or rye, not maize. The cereal grain was harvested on its stalks ("in the straw") and laid up like hay in the barn. In 1787 in East Norfolk this bay was still a gulphstead or goafstead, 'a bay or division of a barn'. The East Anglian dialect mentioned earlier has the word spelled golf, [precisely the same as Modern English golf], golfe, goffe, geoffe(e), gulph, goof, goaf, and its plural goaves.

So golf-like words were used for both the hay itself, a rick piled onto a wagon and hauled back to the barnyard, and the section of floor on which it was stored. The importance of these bays and the struggle to see them all filled, as we mentioned, relates to the survival of the animal herd over the winter, and correspondingly, the survival of their human kindred. Thomas Tusser in 1573, in one of his delightful English husbandry poems, refers to the goffe, or stack of hay, and the gofe ladder, one of the tools of hay-making:

*Let shock take sweate  
Lest goffe take heate.*

Trans.:

[Let the stock take sweat,  
Lest the golf take heat.]

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Tusser's hay tools:

*"Gofe ladder, short pitchfork and long flaile, strawforke and rake."*

Lest it become tedious, here are just a few more examples of the use of this old 'golf' word in the *OED*, some of them fairly recent:

1661:

'A Geoff, or Goffe, a Mow or Reek.'

Trans.:

['A Golf, a Mow, or Rick.']

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1787, East Norfolk:

'Gulph, a mow, or bay-full in a barn.'

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1800, Norfolk dialect:

“*The stra that the throsher had hull’d down from the gofe in the barn.*”

Trans:

[“The straw that the thrasher had hauled down from the golf in the barn.”]

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c. 1825, *Vocabulary of East Anglia*:

“*Goof*, a rick of corn in the straw laid up in a barn; if in the open air it is a *stack*.”

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1825, *East Anglia*:

Goave, ‘to stow corn in a barn’ – “Do you intend to stack this wheat, or goave it?”

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1823, *Suffolk Words*:

“Goof, or Goaf, the mass of corn in the straw in a barn. ‘Riding the goof’ is the work of a boy on horseback, to compress the corn as thrown on the goof.”

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Medieval German (Holthausen 1948, 93) has *golf*, ‘deal floor, flooring, compartment, room, chamber, sleeping-place, hiding-place, shed-room, granary-room, barn-room’, spelled precisely the same as Modern English *golf*. Evidently the word *golf* referred to various kinds of food-floors or food-rooms in Scots, English, Dutch, Frisian, German and the Scandinavian languages. Jakob Grimm, who compiled a Germanic super-dictionary in the mid-nineteenth century, found the word *gulf* in Frisia, 2. ‘East Frisian threshing room’ (Grimm 1072).

After the greater population shifted into towns following the enclosure of the commons the older customs associated with “going a-golfing” became bucolic memories. When the state disarmed the Scottish and English yeomanry, the possession of a spear or a bow by common people became illegal. Customary hunting became the privilege of the upper classes, as it remains today in most of Europe. The few shepherds who remained still had their crooks, and the remaining farmers still had their flails and scythes, so we can imagine contests and games that employed these tools. The shepherd’s staff was made from resilient, lithe woods like the yew, the wood of the forbidden bow, and its head was not unlike the golf club’s.

Grimm noted the Swiss-German word *golf*, ‘little bound rough oakum or flax’, that is, a little ball of oakum or linen thread, spelled precisely the same as Modern English *golf*. This he related to German *gufe*, ‘clew, clue, ball, skein, ball of thread’. So here, finally, is a real clue, if you will. A careful examination of games played with small oakum balls in Switzerland, Germany and the low countries is indicated; a connection with primitive golf-like games is almost predictable. A clue, or clew, in Modern English is a ball of thread, yarn or cord (OE *cliewen*, OHG *kliuwa*, ‘ball’, SKT *glau*, ‘lump’. The verb “to clew” or to “clew up” means to roll something into a ball, such as windrows of hay into rounded mounds, or threads of jute, hemp or flax fiber into oakum clues. In Cretan mythology Ariadne helped Theseus escape from the labyrinth by providing him with a ball of thread to unroll as he sought the Minotaur: Hence the phrase “Ariadne’s clue,” and our modern sense of clues solving mysteries.

Before commercial caulk was available everyone sealed roofs, windows, doors and boats’ planking with oakum. Small balls of oakum were typically made from jute or hemp fiber impregnated with tar, sap or resin. They are mostly used today for caulking the seams in wooden ships and in packing the joints of cast iron drain pipes. Small oakum clues must have been nearly ubiquitous in medieval times. Their resinous quality must have made small remnant golfs perfect for playing games and there must be some record of the time when they were common.

The word oakum (ME okome, okom, OE âcumba, meaning “a-comb”) meant literally the “off-combings” or “combings-out” of fibers. Oakum was at one time recycled from old tarry ropes and cordage, which were painstakingly unraveled and taken apart into fiber; this task of picking and preparation was a common penal occupation in prisons and workhouses.

As an urban footnote, in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* oakum is extracted by orphaned children in a workhouse. Their oakum clews were used by navy ships and the children were told that they were serving their country. In Melville’s *Benito Cereno* the crew of a slave ship spends idle hours picking oakum. Picking oakum was common in Victorian childrens’ workhouses: Girls were required to pick one pound each day, boys 1.5 pounds, and those over sixteen years of age 2 pounds. At Coldbath Fields Prison prisoners had to pick 2 pounds unless sentenced to hard labor, in which case they had to pick from 3 to 6 pounds per day.

It was not long before an urban aristocracy held a corporate monopoly of the manufacture of golf balls. We know that there was substantial traffic in early golf balls between Scotland, Holland, Frisia and northern Germany. An enactment of James VI of Scotland (James I of England) in 1618 stated that “no small quantity of gold and silver is transported zierly [yearly] out of Hienes’ kingdome of Scotland” [his Highness’ kingdom] to support a “considerable importation of golf balls from Holland.” Were Dutch or German golf balls in such demand that they threatened Scotland’s treasury?

The historian Michael William noted that in 1502 James IV of Scotland acquired a set of clubs and balls from a bowmaker in Perth. The invention of firearms eventually made Sunday archery practice obsolete. The artisans who previously made weapons continued their work as golf club makers, charging exorbitant prices for clubs and balls. James I established a monopoly for implements including golf clubs in 1603. In a letter of April 14 he wrote “William Maye, bower [bow-maker], burgess of Edinburgh during all the days of his lyftime, master fledger, bower, club-maker and speir maker, to his Hieness, alsweill for game as weir” [trans: ‘...during all the days of his lifetime, master arrow-maker, bow-maker, club-maker and spear-maker to his Highness, all as well for games as for war.’] Some years later he awarded James Meivill a twenty-one year exclusive franchise to manufacture golf balls, and he embargoed the importation of golf balls from the Netherlands. He also lifted the ban on playing golf on Sunday so long as “devine services” were attended.

The Modern German word kolben, ‘club, mace’, used also for the butt of a rifle, is cognate with the Dutch word kolbe, ‘club’, possibly the origin of the word golf, as mentioned earlier. Kolbig in German means ‘club-shaped, knobby’, and perhaps black powder rifles after they had shot their load were swung by the barrel like clubs. Grimm connected the old definition of kolbe with Scandinavian kólfr, as ‘arrow, bolt, javelin, throwing club or cudgel’. The Old Norse term kólfskot, meant ‘(distance of an) arrow-shot’. Such a distance can only be conceived in open country, in places where the projectile won’t be lost in the trees or high brush.

This kolf-shot may indicate that the distance between shots fired in practice or play was related to the openness of mowings in the meadows, or it may indicate that other kinds of kolf-shots were used in sling-practice and spear-practice. What is intriguing is that the bow and arrow, the spear and the golf club share a similar ancient identity: They had the same makers and they were used in the same open fields in a natural setting and they performed similar tasks. The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset wrote in *Meditations on Hunting* (1948) that as “the atrophy of his instincts increases ‘man’ grows away from his pristine intimacy with Nature.” First he becomes a shepherd, “semistationary,” then a farmer. He ceases to be an expert tracker, “he has

ceased to be wild—that is, he has lost form as a fieldsman.” So, suggests Ortega, the quest of the hunter is to go against history, against civilization, and to return to Nature.

Casting projectiles, including arrows and blunt arrows, is an art from the wild, an art of the hunter. Walking in the fields, swinging old tools and weapons and wielding sticks and handaxes is in general one of the oldest arts in the world.

In the January/February 2013 issue of *Orion* magazine the ecologist Paul Kingsnorth offered a critique of civilization and technological progress. Kingsnorth gives summer classes in England and Scotland in the use of the scythe. He wrote in his article that these classes are the most fulfilling thing he does. He described curved cutting tools for use on grass that date back at least ten thousand years to the dawn of agriculture and thus to the dawn of civilization. He wrote that like the tool, the word scythe has prehistoric origins, its Proto-Indo-European root SEK meaning to cut or to divide, the root found in our words sickle and sex.

Kingsnorth wrote that mowing with a scythe shuts down the jabbering brain for a little while, or at least the rational part of it, leaving only the primitive part. He says it leaves the body in tune with the tool, and the tool in tune with the land. The mower concentrates without thinking, following the lay of the ground with the curve of the blade, aware of the keenness of its edge, hearing the birds and seeing things moving in the grass, everything connected with everything else — “and if it isn’t,” he writes, “it doesn’t work.”

The primitive farmers of northern Europe were also hunters, and they had for millennia used their slings to hurl small stones. They threw various forms of lead-staffs, which are sticks weighted at one end with lead. Edward Tylor (1865) wrote that in Hampshire the throwing cudgel called a squoyle was used in a ritual the day after Christmas, which was the day of the English squirrel feast. Twenty or thirty villagers headed to the wood with leaded sticks called squoyles or scales, and by encircling the trees gathered a “heaping pile of squirrels” for the feast. The squoyle was a short stick loaded at one end with lead, as opposed to the snog, which was a throwing stick weighted only with wood. Anne Wilson (1973), who wrote about the foods of early Britain, found evidence of the red squirrel being a dish “for a great lord,” and described the delicacy browet farsure, an early fifteenth-century pottage meat of partridge and squirrel.

Hunting with primitive projectiles is universal. The curved throwing-club of the Native Americans was sometimes called a rappahannock or rabbit-stick. It was often made from the base and trunk of a dogwood sapling, the root-knot being the hard and heavy end. Two or three sticks would be thrown at a rabbit simultaneously. The rappahannock is similar to the knockberry of lower Africa and the trombash of the Upper Nile and the waddy of Australia (the aborigines throw a boomerang and a waddy interchangeably). The point is that our ancestors didn’t need complex tools like the bow and arrow to forage in wood and field, and the art of casting things for dinner was as familiar to the Englishman or Scotsman as it was to everyone else.

The act of spear-throwing, especially with the atlatl or spear-throwing stick (pronounced like ‘Atlantic’), closely approximates the swing of the golf club. The atlatl greatly increases a spear’s velocity and penetrating power. The peculiar weighted atlatls of North America are particularly curious, early golf-techie-like hurling devices. Another such device is the wield-sling (Old Norse val-slóngva), the war-sling of David and Goliath fame. Inside the old crannogs and earthen fortresses of northern Europe archaeologist often find piles of small stones, the most primitive of ammunitions.

A sling pouch may be fabricated from a piece of leather or cloth approximately 3 ½” by 10”. To each end is attached a cord, one cord being 3” shorter than the other. The tips of the cords

often terminate in little balls or knots. As many as three small stones may be cast in one shot. The sling is swung three times around one's head and the smaller cord is released. Tylor cited in *Primitive Culture* (1871) a fifteenth-century English poem commending the art of slinging among the exercises of a good soldier. Actual practice had fallen out of use by late medieval times:

*Use eek the cast of stone, with slynge or honde:  
It falleth oft, yf other shot there none is,  
Men harnysed in steel may not withstonde  
The multitude and mighty cast of stonys;  
...And slynges are not noyous for to beare.*

Trans:

[‘Always use the casting of stones, with the sling or the hand:  
It befalls one often, if there isn't another kind of shot,  
That men wearing steel armor may not withstand  
The mighty casting of a multitude of stones;  
...And slings are not noxious for to bear’]  
(i.e., slings are not heavy to carry around like metal weaponry).

—  
From the Irish folksong “Ned of the Hill” —  
*Young Ned of the hill has no castle, no hall,  
No bowmen, no spearmen to come at his call...*

—  
What could be more like a well-hit golf shot than a perfectly-cast spear or cudgel or sling? Our inquiry is more about hunting, however, than it is about warfare. The real attraction of golf may be the same experience that Paul Kingsnorth reported: When we sling our scythe we follow the lay of the ground with the curve of the blade and become aware of the keenness of its edge and can hear the birds and see things moving in the grass ahead of us, and everything becomes connected with everything else.

José Ortega y Gasset, considered by many to be the foremost philosopher of the twentieth century and the man who gave birth to modern ecology, wrote something similar to Kingsnorth in his *Meditations on Hunting*: At its zenith the hunt causes the whole horizon to become charged with a strange electricity; it begins to move, to stretch elastically. Suddenly the orgiastic element shoots forth, the dionysiac, which flows and boils in the depths of all hunting. Dionysos is the hunting god: ‘Skilled cynegetic,’ Euripides called him in the *Bacchantes*. ‘Yes, yes,’ answers the chorus, ‘the god is a hunter!’ There is a universal vibration. Things that before were inert and flaccid have suddenly grown nerves, and they gesticulate, announce, fortell.

Civilization is all about progress and improvements. New inventions used to be rare. The first true machine was the bow and arrow, and an extraordinary ten thousand years passed before the appearance of the second machine, the potter's wheel. The bow and arrow never really replaced the spear, which was the preferred weapon of Beowulf's warriors in the eighth century and remained essential weaponry until the invention of firearms. Are these the primitive golfer's arts, casting the Old Norse kólfr, which meant all these things, ‘arrow, bolt, javelin, throwing club and cudgel’? Was the kolf-shot limited to the bow and arrow, or did it include all these weapons of the hunt? Any photograph of the golf shot's point of impact tells the story—and this is best seen in shots of golfers' faces. There is no doubt that this dynamism is attractive, and so

too is simply being out in the open air together, being in Nature; but does it really mean we are hunter-golfers?

Gathering in the grain and hay during the thousands of years of early farming, which harvest happened just once each year, was an arduous job, but it was also a joyful task that guaranteed our winter food supply. This gathering-in went on for several weeks, creating pre-cured “golfs,” curing them in the fields and carrying them home. Were the rounded fat ricks on their wagons shot back at the target “golf” bay in the barn, which floor was waiting between its posts to be filled like a hole on a green by a golf ball? However the term evolved, the hay-house bays were not filled in a day. A deeper question is whether bringing in load after load, week after week, this cheerfulness of “going a-golfing,” was connected with the hunt when game was raised, when birds were flushed, when a reconnection with Nature and wildlife and bringing in wild food took place?

To conclude, golf in various spellings referred to little balls of fiber and to harvests and to fodder or food-floors or food-rooms in Scots, English, Dutch, Frisian, German and the Scandinavian languages. A prehistoric connection is implied between a natural life of farming, tools and weapons and the origins of golf. With so much circumstantial evidence why is there nothing about this in mandarin golf histories? Why this apparent breach of historical consciousness? The customs that became modern golf were never recorded by the urban clerks and clerics. Is it possible that golf’s connection with peasants was being denied?

We obviously don’t know what really happened. We transited very quickly from a rural and oral prehistory to a literate and selective history written by the urban conquerors. We were corporatized. England’s corporatization of Celtic peasants is infamous. It became illegal for Welsh, Scottish or Irish natives to speak their native languages or own land, the penalty for which was death. But English family-farmers had been disenfranchized even earlier, as we know from a long list of infamous English uprisings, each one in its way a protest against technologic corporatization and alienation from the comfort and independence of family farming.

Luddites, early 1800s.

Machine-Breakers, late 1700s.

Levellers, 1720s.

Diggers, 1640s.

Kett’s Rising, 1540s.

Ill Lammas Day, 1520s.

Briscoe’s Close Rising, 1480s.

Jack Cade’s Rebellion, 1450s.

There were even larger uprisings that preceded these. Across the British and Irish landscape the old farmsteads and later villages eventually stood deserted, the countryside “dispopulated.” By 1789, when Oliver Goldsmith’s poem *The Deserted Village* was published, it protested too late the decay over several centuries of England’s villages, which lay as empty ruins across the land. Goldsmith defended the accuracy of his reporting, saying as to the facts of

*...the depopulation... I have taken all possible pains, in my country excursions for these four or five years past, to be certain...*

*In regretting the depopulation of the country, I inveigh against the increase of our luxuries. For twenty or thirty years past it has been the fashion to consider luxury as one of the greatest national advantages; and all the wisdom of antiquity in that particular as erroneous. Still, however, I must remain a professed ancient...*

What were these “luxuries” but the allure of the new towns and their shops? One of the most poignant lamentations over the loss of a simpler country life was the Scottish poet Robert Henryson’s *Tale of the Country Mouse and the City Mouse*, written in the late 1400s—three centuries before Goldsmith. Small children still hear a nursery version today but the original was written for adults. When City Mouse went to visit her twin sister in the country and was fed a meal of nuts she was affronted by the simple fare and said “Sister, is *this* your daily food?” and called the meal a mockery. Country Mouse defended her ancient ways, saying that she kept the “goods and custom of my mother, and also my living in poverty, for lands we have none in property.” They went together to the city and after nearly losing her life visiting the sumptuous home of her city sister, Country Mouse says (author’s translation from Scots, Mackie, *Scottish Verse*, 1956): ‘Farewell, sister, thy feast here I defy!’:

*Your [city] manor is all mingled with care,  
Your goose is good, but your garlic-sauce is as sour as gall...  
I heard her say as she passed into her [country] den  
As warm as wool, though supposedly not great,  
Full and dry, stuffed both butt and ben  
With beans and nuts, peas, rye and wheat;  
Whenever she wants, she has enough to eat;  
In quiet and ease, without any dread,  
But to her sister’s feast no more was led.*

*Moral:*

*Who has enough, of more he has no need,  
Though what he has be little in quantity.  
Great abundance and blind prosperity  
Oftentimes makes for a bad conclusion;  
The sweetest life, therefore, in this country,  
Is security with few possessions.*

This protest against the Renaissance and its newly-hatched market economy appeared concurrently with modern golf in the written record.

In Scotland, our putative home of golf, a commercialization of agriculture took place after the clearings of the peasant populations from their family farms. Former farmers became farm workers, employees who were hired for six-month stints, at Martimas, the old autumn feast day, and six months later at Whitsuntide (Whitsunday in Scotland is a fixed date, May 25th). Commercial landlords leased their land in lots to farmers for agreed terms who in turn employed laborers for six month periods.

At the bigger commercial farms, the “fairm-toons” [farm-towns], as they were called, the landlord employed a grieve as a general farm manager. Next in line was the ploughman, the most respected and best paid of the workers. Then came the cattleman (the “orra-man”) a young jack of all trades. The unmarried men, the “bothy loons” in Northeast Scotland, lived in the small farm bothy, a tiny rustic building usually built in two connected parts, butt and ben, one a human side and one an animal byre. It was with the animals that the “bothy boys” slept. (Bothy boys became famous among folklorists as balladeers for their singing of traditional Scottish folksongs.) Every six months all employed laborers were forced to “flit” in search of new employment and quarters. “Moonlight flitting” was the moving of one’s family at night to avoid paying debts. These were

the economic predecessors of today's migrant workers. "Flitting Friday" was the Whitsunday moving day and many poor Scots today living in small flats still must move twice each year, or at least once.

Behind the usual sad history of urban alienation is there something more tragic, something unspoken like the Emperor's New Clothes? Was our shift to modernity an under-documented, virtually unrecorded social trauma? Was it on the scale of a social holocaust? For those who lost their farmsteads, had the older customs, like making hay and cheese, become unspeakable post-traumatic memories?

Only now, with hyper-urbanity suffocating the planet, are we wondering what happened and what we may have lost. The received history may be worse than a lie — it may be more like a gaping wound: Instead of merely 300 documented peasant rebellions across the northern European landscape, there may have been thousands of uprisings and skirmishes. Instead of merely 15000 of Goldsmith's deserted villages, there may have been hundreds of thousands of community tragedies, every one awful and unspeakable. This wasn't just a Generation Gap, it was an Ages Gap: an Age of Earth and Wildlife had become an Age of Town and Luxury.

With the commercialization of agriculture former farmers had become farm workers. How different their lives were from the primitive farm families who had lived as cohesive units, who had now lost more than an earlier version of farming or, for that matter, an earlier version of a pastime like golf. The question regarding golf's origins is altered at its core: Instead of "Where did golf come from?" it becomes "Why golf?" We suddenly realize we know almost nothing about pre-literate times.

*Why do farmers farm, given their economic adversities on top of the many frustrations and difficulties normal to farming?... They love the measure of independence that farm life can still provide. I have an idea that a lot of farmers have gone to a lot of trouble merely to be self-employed to live at least a part of their lives without a boss.*

Wendell Berry

— i.e., without an archos, the very definition of anarchy. We lost our relatively egalitarian and anarchist clans with their enduring relationships. Rather than a prehistoric golf course we lost a prehistoric countryside with its independent food sources and convivialities. Rather than a primitive form of golf we lost our natural world.

*As a poet I hold the most archaic values on earth . . . the fertility of the soil, the magic of animals... the common work of the tribe. I try to hold both history and the wilderness in mind, that my poems may approach the true measure of things and stand against the unbalance and ignorance of our times.*

Gary Snyder

*The Practice of the Wild, 1991*

Ortega wrote that history is always made against the grain of Nature. We need "rest from the enormous discomfort and all-embracing disquiet of history" by returning to Nature, an instinct that is already "evanescent" in us, that is almost entirely "erased." Without this natural instinct we fall into "those chasms of vital emptiness that are generally called wearisomeness, 'spleen,' boredom." To re-enter Nature, to find "immersion in Nature," is achieved by the temporary rehabilitation of "that part of himself that is still an animal," in hunting. Golf may have been reduced by civilization to a game played on strictly drafted courses with rigidly strict rules, but in its unique way it may harbor and activate instincts we have almost forgotten.

After the early farmers' hills were mowed low at the end of the harvest, (and after any hunting that had accompanied the mowing), there was an annual opportunity to practice in the open fields with a variety of long-distance throwing and hurling and casting and striking instruments. Perhaps it was then that a target patch was marked out, a prototype of the modern golf green, and standing far away from it we tried our "golf-shot." We saw who could fire an arrow the farthest, who could hit a target with a sling from the greatest distance, or strike a small object with a club of one kind or another to see how far and accurately it would fly.

When Europe urbanized and we were dragged into towns did we refuse to give up this old conviviality by creating civilized "golf courses" upon which we could still play? Did we make golf rules and did we then make even more golf rules? Perhaps all this rigidity is civilized golf's worst misdemeanor, but it doesn't preclude that which makes walking the golf course attractive if golf is a throwback to the prehistoric hunt. A golfing threesome or foursome arms itself with implements capable of enormous speed and power. Then they set out together as small bands in search of very small targets. They hush altogether while one of them takes aim and strikes. They watch in mutual awe or dismay. They experience together the rapture of a good shot finding its mark. They celebrate and feast at the nineteenth hole. According to Ortega something ancient is at work here, something prehistoric and still vestigial in us – our most primitive human memory. From this perspective golf may have arisen in four stages:

As hunters for untold millenia we practiced the art of long-shot projectiles with striking clubs (kolben), slings and spears, bolts and arrows (kolfr) over enormous distances (kolf-shot).

As herders we practiced our art in the low-grazed dells and hills, we hunted birds and small game in season to supplement our diet, striking (gowf) clews (golf, gufe) and other small balls enormous distances with our shepherd's crooks.

As farmers we waited each year to go a-golfing (a-golping), mowing with our swinging scythes, and afterwards practicing our long-shot art upon the wide-open meadow floor, while our corn and hay was heaped into rounded mows (golph, golfe) to cure before being brought (goave) home to be placed or stacked (gulve, gulving), a heap (goffe) sitting on the hay-house floor (golf).

As town- and city-dwellers, bereft of our ancestral fields, we staked out the little-used sandy hills (links and dunes) along the shore and practiced our prehistoric long-shot art in spite of every civilized sensibility – orderly citizens, men and women alike, passing on to their children a practice of the ancient ways.

Not every golfer will share this vision of the prehistoric, of the *Practice of the Wild* as the poet Gary Snyder calls it. Only hunting, Ortega believed, allows us to be *in* the country. He wrote "I mean *within* a countryside which, moreover is authentically countryside. And only the hunting ground is pure countryside—neither farmland, nor battleground, nor tourist country." Isn't this also what Kingsnorth was describing? When one is hunting, writes Ortega, one is "emigrating from our human world to an authentic 'outside' from which history represents the retreat or anabasis..." When one is hunting the air has another, more exquisite feel as it glides over the skin or enters the lungs, the rocks acquire a more expressive psysiognomy, and the vegetation becomes loaded with meaning.

This is because the hunter "feels tied through the earth to the animal he pursues, whether the animal is in view, hidden or absent." This "mystical union with the animal allows the hunter to perceive the environment as the prey does..." Are we as golfers seeking our unalienated animal selves of prehistory and our species' oldest dance?

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