

Describe and explain some of the early stick and ball games that claim to be forerunners to golf. Discuss how and where each of the games were played and their similarities and differences to golf.

There are several ancient pastimes that bear a resemblance to golf as we know it today. However, their origins are even more difficult to establish than that of 'modern' golf, as accurate records were not kept and claims are easy to make up without a basis in fact.

'Paganica' (or Pangea) was a game played during the great Roman civilisation, possibly as long as 2500 years ago. This was a club and ball game, but it is unknown whether the aim was to hit a target, or if there were two teams playing against each other. The ball is thought to have been made of feathers wrapped in leather, and was probably bigger than a cricket ball.

The Roman Empire expanded into northern Europe and as far as Scotland in its heyday, so it can be assumed that this game was brought to many other countries and developed as it spread into different cultures and societies.

In France and Belgium for example, the game of 'chole' was written about in 1353, which involved bent wooden clubs and leather filled balls. This did however involve two teams hitting one ball to a target. The similarity to golf lies in the idea of limiting the number of shots/strokes for each team, and using natural hazards within the field of play to make it more challenging. It also used supports to 'tee' the ball up for the first shot.

Prior to this, a game called 'jeu de mail' was played in the south of France with straight wooden, mallet ended clubs and wooden balls. The objective was to hit the ball to a target a set distance away in as few strokes as possible, with everyone playing their own ball. A popular game in England, Scotland, Italy and France in the 15th Century called 'pall mall', seems to be a very close relation of 'jeu de mail'.

'Kolf' (or kolven, meaning club) was a game played in the Netherlands from around the late 13th Century. It was an indoor game but evolved outdoors onto set playing areas, with two posts (or a doorway) as the 'goal'. The wooden sticks had metal heads with flat faces, making it easier to hit the ball. The aim was to reach the goal, sometimes 2.5 miles away, in teams, in as few strokes as possible and using the same ball.

Another important historical game is 'chuiwan', played in China prior to the 10th Century. It is remarkably similar to the golf of today, both in the type of equipment used and that the target was a hole in the ground. Chuiwan translates as 'hitball' and it seems to have been played by the wealthy ruling classes, much like golf was later.

In your opinion, which game was the forerunner to golf? You need to justify your answer with reference to the game itself, its origins in another country or location, and the likelihood that it could have come to Scotland at the right time to have developed into golf.

It is extremely difficult to say with any certainty that golf originated from one place or from one game. There are several reasons why this is so. First of all there are many variants of games played with sticks, clubs and balls, and this has been the case right throughout recorded history until today. There is also the historical timeline which shows similar games being played simultaneously in different, distant countries with no political or economic relationship. The language and social barriers can also prevent us finding accurate records.

However, there is an increasing amount of evidence to suggest that chuiwan is the most likely to have initiated golf in Scotland. As China opens up to western academics, historical records such as paintings, monographs and murals show that chuiwan predates the first mention of golf by three or four

hundred years. By 1279 the Mongol Empire had reached well within eastern Europe and it is thought possible that the game was established then. War and trade could have then brought it to northern Europe, specifically Holland, which had a good relationship with Scotland.

The Dutch 'kolf' certainly influenced the Scottish word golf, although the games are slightly different. It is equally possible that hockey, polo, shinty, hurling, or even cricket, baseball and lacrosse could have developed from 'kolf', which itself probably came from 'paganica'.

Many of the old games show similarities to modern day golf, and it seems likely that the evolution of stick and ball games had a common theme. Perhaps it was a natural social development that occurred at broadly similar times all over the world thanks to travellers discoveries and exposure to other countries. The timing of chuiwan could be a coincidence as it could even be argued that missionaries took a similar game over there. However, in my opinion golf probably originated in China, although it is still very hard to prove conclusively.