



Optimal Zenith Spor Bilimleri Dergisi

Journal of Optimal Zenith Sport Science

E-ISSN: 3023-8005 DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15462928

Optimal Zenith Spor Bilimleri Dergisi, Mayıs 2025 2(1):47-55

Body Culture and Wrestling Tradition in the Ottoman Empire

Osmanlı'da Beden Kültürü ve Güreş Geleneği

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MAKALE BİLGİSİ/ARTICLE INFORMATION

Makale Türü/Article Types: Derleme

Geliş Tarihi/Received: 21 Mart / March 2025

Kabul Tarihi/Accepted: 02 Mayıs /May 2025

Yıl/Year:2025 Cilt/Volume:2 Sayı/Issue:1 Sayfa/Pages: 47-55

Atıf/Cite as: ARSTANBEKOV, S. "Body Culture and Wrestling Tradition in the Ottoman Empire"
Optimal Zenith Spor Bilimleri Dergisi, 2(1), May 2025: 47-55

Sorumlu Yazar/Corresponding Author: Yapılan "Body Culture and Wrestling Tradition in the Ottoman Empire" başlıklı bu çalışmada Yükseköğretim Kurumları Bilimsel Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Yönergesi kapsamında uyulması belirtilen tüm kurallara uyulmuştur.

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Abstract

This study examines the historical development of the wrestling tradition by focusing on the cultural, moral, and social meanings attributed to the body in the Ottoman Empire. In the Ottoman intellectual system, the body was regarded as a carrier of discipline, spirituality, and social belonging, and wrestling was seen not only as a physical activity but also as a means of conveying social identity and values. Pehlivanlık was constructed as a way of life identified with moral integrity and physical maturity. With the proclamation of the Republic, sport became an ideological tool, and wrestling was institutionalized within the framework of modernization policies but distanced from its traditional conceptual world. Although events such as Kırkpınar have been preserved under the status of cultural heritage, the educational and moral dimensions of wrestling have been reduced to the level of ceremonial representation. The article evaluates the transformation of the concept of bodily discipline from the Ottoman period to the present, through both the historical and contemporary representations of wrestling, and discusses the sustainability of this cultural heritage.

Keywords: History; Ottoman Society; Body Culture; Pehlivanlık; Wrestling; Modernization; Cultural Heritage

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Öz

Bu çalışma, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda bedenin kültürel, ahlaki ve toplumsal anlamlarını merkeze alarak güreş geleneğinin tarihsel gelişimini incelemektedir. Osmanlı düşün sisteminde beden; disiplin, maneviyat ve sosyal aidiyetin taşıyıcısı olarak değerlendirilmiş, güreş ise yalnızca fiziksel bir etkinlik değil, aynı zamanda toplumsal bir kimlik ve değer aktarım aracı olmuştur. Pehlivanlık, ahlaki bütünlük ve fiziksel olgunlukla özdeşleşen bir yaşam biçimi olarak kurgulanmıştır. Cumhuriyet'in ilanı ile birlikte spor, ideolojik bir araç hâline gelmiş; güreş ise modernleşme politikaları içinde kurumsallaştırılmış, fakat geleneksel anlam dünyasından uzaklaştırılmıştır. Kırkpınar gibi etkinlikler kültürel miras kapsamında korunsun da, güreşin eğitimsel ve ahlaki yönü törenselleştirilmiştir. Makalede, Osmanlı'dan günümüze beden terbiyesi anlayışının geçirdiği dönüşüm, güreşin hem tarihsel hem de güncel temsilleri üzerinden değerlendirilmiş; kültürel mirasın sürdürülebilirliği tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tarih; Osmanlı Toplum; Beden Kültürü; Pehlivanlık; Güreş; Modernleşme; Kültürel Miras

Introduction

The Ottoman Empire stands out not only for its political and administrative structure but also as a unique civilization that attributed cultural and social meaning to physical activities. In the Ottoman intellectual framework, the body was not merely regarded as a physical entity; it was conceptualized as a symbol of discipline, morality, spirituality, and strength. In this context, bodily discipline was considered an essential tool for both individual formation and collective socialization. The culture of the body, shaped within both the palace and public life, reflected a multi-layered structure that addressed the needs of a warrior society while simultaneously embodying aesthetic and religious dimensions (Soyer, 2004). Among traditional sports, wrestling emerged as one of the most distinguished practices. It was seen not only as a demonstration of physical competence but also as a way of life associated with courage, moral stance, patience, humility, and spiritual maturity. In particular, the concept of *pehlivanlık* (heroic wrestling) symbolized not merely an athletic identity but also a spiritually cultivated personality. In this respect, *pehlivanlık* represented more than physical struggle; it evolved into a cultural pattern that shaped the ideal human type within Ottoman society (Yüksel, 2018). This privileged status of wrestling could be observed across various layers of the empire. Within the palace environment, the patronage of wrestlers was considered a form of prestige, and those registered in the *ceyb-i hümayun* (imperial purse) records were placed directly under the protection of the sultan, occupying a prominent position within the state hierarchy (Karadoğan, 2021). Wrestling's social function was not limited to the palace; it was also transferred to a broader spiritual realm through dervish lodges (*tekkes*) and religious establishments. Particularly in Anatolia, wrestling lodges served as comprehensive educational spaces where wrestlers were cultivated not only physically but also morally, religiously, and culturally. These spaces integrated the disciplining aspects of sport with Sufi training, becoming institutional representations of the Ottoman understanding of bodily education (Türkmen & Demirhan, 2014). The widespread and systematic practice of wrestling in the Ottoman Empire further reinforced its place in folk culture. Wrestling matches held during festivals, fairs, and public celebrations were not merely athletic events but also served as expressions of social solidarity, public spectacle, and traditional ritual. In this sense, wrestling became deeply embedded in the collective memory of society and was represented across cultural domains such as art, literature, and architecture (Şener, 2018).

This study explores the wrestling tradition through the historical and cultural meaning of the body in the Ottoman Empire. It investigates the social functions of the *pehlivanlık* identity, its relationship with palace and lodge structures, its standing among the public, and its transformation during the modernization process. Evaluating wrestling not merely as a sport but as a multi-dimensional cultural practice reveals the depth and richness of the Ottoman relationship with the body.

Perception of the Body in Ottoman Society

In Ottoman society, the body was not regarded solely as a physiological entity; it was also understood as a multi-dimensional construct carrying religious, social, and political meanings. Within Islamic thought, the body was considered both a sacred trust and a means of disciplining the self. This understanding also permeated Ottoman society, shaping individuals' relationships

with their bodies through religious references. As Kara (2012) has demonstrated, in Islamic societies, the body was seen as a potential carrier of sinful tendencies and simultaneously as a domain that required moral discipline in order to attain ethical perfection. This multi-layered meaning attributed to the body became particularly evident in educational policies and public practices. During the late Ottoman period, influenced by Westernization movements, new approaches were adopted that emphasized the disciplining, shaping, and functionalization of the body. In this process, physical education ceased to be merely a means of supporting physical development and became an effective instrument in the ideological construction of society. Çelik and Bulgu (2010) note that this transformation was particularly evident in the gymnastics courses implemented in military schools and in broader physical education policies. In this regard, physical education became one of the central tools of the Ottoman modernization process and also served as a vehicle for nationalist ideology. As Günay (2017) emphasized, during the post-Second Constitutional Era, sports associations and physical education classes in schools were used not only to promote individual health but also to enhance social resilience, foster national consciousness, and construct collective identity. Dever and İslam (2015) have shown that the systematic development of physical education curricula from the late Ottoman period through the early Republic revealed an ideological framework concerned with the control, guidance, and shaping of the body. These approaches demonstrate that the body was not only an individual entity but also a collective construct shaped and interpreted through education. Another significant turning point in this transformation was the process of secularization. Demir (2018) notes that the desacralization of the body in Ottoman society and its transfer to a secular domain were closely intertwined with processes of medicalization and educational reform. During this process, the body ceased to be perceived as a divine trust and became an object of modern science—an entity open to interventions aimed at maximizing individual performance potential. This transformation also had gendered dimensions, particularly in efforts to strengthen the male body as a way of constructing a robust social order.

In the late Ottoman period, bodily culture became a significant instrument for militarizing society and reinforcing political loyalty. Consequently, the body was no longer a private domain but was transformed into an ideological form that served the interests of the state. The perception of the body in Ottoman society thus evolved from a traditional view shaped by religious references to a secular, ideological, and functional structure as a result of modernization. This evolution redefined the body as not only an individual reality but also as a political and cultural tool, reconstructed through educational institutions, sports associations, and state policies.

The Socio-Cultural Position of Wrestling

Wrestling has been regarded as one of the most deeply rooted and symbolically meaningful sports within the realm of physical activities in Ottoman society. This practice was viewed as an embodiment of warrior virtue, mastery over the body, and moral discipline. Its place within society extended far beyond individual physical performance and served as a medium through which cultural memory, traditional values, and social belonging were transmitted. The identity of the pehlivan (wrestler) formed a social pattern representing virtues idealized in Ottoman society, such as honesty, generosity, patience, and a spirit of struggle (Buyar et al., 2019). In the Ottoman Empire, the social value of wrestling became institutionalized through the palace

wrestling system, operated under the supervision of the sultan. According to the Ceyb-i Hümayun records, sultans considered wrestlers not merely as competitive athletes but also as representatives of palace culture, granting them official salaries. This points to wrestling's function as a practice embedded within elite administrative structures (Kesgin, 2020). Wrestlers were appreciated not only for their physical strength but also for their dignified behavior and adherence to moral codes. Public wrestling festivals and competitions functioned as cultural rituals that reinforced social cohesion. These events brought together different layers of society and created a shared space of experience for both spectators and participants. Especially in rural areas, towns, and waqf lands, oil wrestling was performed not only as a sporting activity but also as a social ritual (Buyar et al., 2019). Wrestling also held an important place in visual culture. In Turkish painting, wrestling figures served as recurring themes that bridged cultural memory with visual aesthetics. Yılmaz (2025) notes that such representations reinforced wrestling's symbolic status as an ancestral sport in visual narratives from both the Ottoman and Republican periods. The frequent depiction of wrestlers in artwork testifies to the respect attributed to pehlivans and highlights the enduring presence of wrestling within popular culture. The cultural structure of wrestling was also shaped by its clothing. Kaygusuz et al. (2019) emphasize that the traditional *kispet*—the leather trousers worn during oil wrestling—carries symbolic meanings beyond its functional purpose. The *kispet* not only reflects craftsmanship but also represents the wrestler's personal discipline, professional honor, and social status. Each garment, with its specific leather type, buckles, workmanship, and ownership tradition, encodes the continuity of the pehlivan culture across generations (Kaygusuz et al., 2019). Regional variations of wrestling also emerged in the Ottoman Empire, contributing to the formation of local identities. One example is *aba* wrestling, practiced particularly in the Hatay region, which is notable for its folkloric texture and ritualistic structure. Çetin and Coşkun (2020) analyze the formal and functional characteristics of *aba* wrestling, emphasizing its role in the cultural geography of the region. It not only provided social prestige within local communities but also contributed to the physical and mental development of young men (Çetin & Coşkun, 2020). Travelogues from the Ottoman period also provide insights into the societal impact of wrestling. Şahin (2007), drawing from the observations of British travelers, notes that wrestling drew large crowds during public festivities and that the respect shown to wrestlers attracted considerable attention among foreign observers. These accounts indicate that wrestling was not merely a cultural practice confined to Ottoman society but also functioned as a recognizable symbol of identity in the eyes of the outside world (Şahin, 2007). Ottoman wrestling functioned as a multifaceted social institution that generated significant cultural influence—ranging from visual arts and public entertainment to courtly protocol and local identity. Wrestling, shaped by an understanding of bodily discipline that extended beyond physical skill, became a structural element in the formation of the individual's moral, cultural, and social integrity.

The Transformation of the Wrestling Tradition Through Modernization

The transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey brought about a structural transformation in the understanding of physical discipline. The newly established regime, shaped in line with the goals of modernization, positioned sport and physical education not merely as tools for individual development but as mechanisms for ensuring national discipline and social order. Within this framework, the wrestling tradition was redefined under modern body politics; its traditional functions were weakened and instead, it was preserved in a

symbolic and superficial manner (Kurtcebe & Poyraz, 2023). The enactment of Law No. 3530 on Physical Education in 1938 laid the legal groundwork for the state-regulated organization of sports. With this legislation, physical education was systematically incorporated into school curricula, and physical competence became a politically charged objective. During this period, body politics, influenced by eugenic ideologies, began to define the ideal citizen based on physical norms. Sport was not merely a method of improving public health, but a tool used to produce individuals in accordance with the disciplinary ethos of the regime (Ayvaz, 2022). In the context of modern conceptions of the body, wrestling was increasingly distanced from its traditional semantic world. Its moral and spiritual dimensions were pushed aside in favor of a performance-oriented structure focused on athletic achievement. However, this new approach did not entirely erase the *pehlivanlık* (wrestler-hero) tradition; instead, it reduced it to a cultural symbol. Oil wrestling festivals were staged during national holidays and local events, becoming cultural spectacles rather than lived practices (Kahraman, 1997). The Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival stands as the most visible example of this transformation. During the Ottoman period, it had been organized by religious foundations, lodges, and local authorities; in the Republican era, it was brought under direct state control. Wrestlers were no longer traditional athletes but were transformed into figures associated with local tourism, public promotion, and folklore policy (Kahraman, 1997). Thus, *pehlivanlık* lost its institutional backing and became a symbolic figure tied to folk culture. The new sports policy of the Republican regime aimed to regulate popular sports according to universal standards. While Westernized gymnastics, athletics, and team sports were promoted in school curricula, traditional sports such as wrestling were supported only marginally as leisure activities or ceremonial displays (Ayvaz, 2022; Kurtcebe & Poyraz, 2023). This limited support hindered the institutional development of wrestling and marginalized it within the modern sports system, weakening its competitive potential. The secularization of sport also rendered the religious and spiritual dimensions of *pehlivanlık* ineffective. The wrestling tradition, previously connected with dervish lodges and moral instruction in the Ottoman Empire, found no counterpart within the ideology of the Republic. Principles such as patience, self-discipline, and inner balance—central to *pehlivanlık*—lost their relevance in the new paradigm focused on physical efficiency and competitive success. These values survived only in oral history and narrative tradition, with no reflection in the formal education system or federative structures. This modernization-driven transformation turned wrestling from a living tradition into a commemorated heritage. While the *pehlivanlık* culture continues to exist today, its current form is characterized more by symbolic and ceremonial attributes than by its original functional significance.

The Institutionalization of Wrestling and State Policies in the Republican Era

The body politics formulated after the proclamation of the Republic transformed sport into an ideological instrument. Sport was expected not only to physically discipline individuals but also to contribute to the reconstruction of national identity. Within this framework, traditional sports were reassessed, and wrestling, due to its historical legitimacy and widespread popular acceptance, was brought under control and reshaped within an institutional structure (Vatandaş & Vatandaş, 2023). During the early Republican period, wrestling was reorganized under state supervision. The enactment of Law No. 3530 on Physical Education in 1938 placed sport at the center of public policy. With this legislation, the General Directorate of Physical Education was established, equipped with broad authority over areas ranging from the planning of sports facilities to the selection of athletes. Wrestling was incorporated into this institutional framework and subjected to direct central oversight (Ayvaz, 2022). At the core of this physical education ideology was a biopolitical approach. Vatandaş and Vatandaş (2023) emphasize that during this period, sport was conceived not simply as a means of improving public health, but

as a mechanism for shaping the ideal citizen. The traditional structural elements of wrestling were simplified accordingly, and its spiritual dimensions were rendered invisible. Within this increasingly centralized understanding of sport, wrestling came to be evaluated solely through physical performance criteria. As a result, a clear divergence emerged between the original form of traditional oil wrestling and modern Olympic-style freestyle wrestling. Yıldiran (2000) notes that these two types of wrestling differ significantly in terms of their cultural, structural, and scientific characteristics. While freestyle wrestling was restructured to conform to international standards, oil wrestling was increasingly associated with festivals and ceremonies, relegated to a folkloric domain. The moral dimensions of *pehlivanlık* (heroic wrestling), however, were never systematized within federative structures. Zelyurt (2013) highlights that sports policies, which began to take shape during the Tanzimat period, gained institutional strength in the early Republican era. Within this continuity, the function of wrestling was defined as a means of disciplining the body for the benefit of society and transforming the athlete into a productive, harmonious, and disciplined citizen. Traditional wrestling events such as the Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival retained their symbolic significance during this period, but they were appropriated as tools for state propaganda and national representation (Kahraman, 1997). With modernization, sport was integrated into urban planning and national development strategies, and wrestling was recontextualized accordingly. Saydam (2024) emphasizes that, in the post-Republican era, sport came to be viewed as a component of physical planning in urban environments. Wrestling, in this context, was incorporated into the cultural event calendars of local governments and sustained through state-supported organizations. However, this continuation occurred as part of a representational process disconnected from traditional modes of production. In conclusion, during the post-Republican period, wrestling became embedded within the ideological and institutional logic of modern sport. It was detached from its traditional structure and institutionalized under the control of state sports policies. This transformation redefined wrestling from a living social practice into an organizational structure centered around discipline, nationalism, and spectacle.

The Cultural Heritage Status and Contemporary Representations of Wrestling

For centuries, wrestling has served as a cultural expression embodying the physical, spiritual, and aesthetic values of Turkish society. Widely embraced both among the Ottoman court elite and the general populace, this sport contributed to the construction of social order through the body and was regarded as an effective tool for the moral and physical training of the individual. With the transition to the Republican period, traditional forms of wrestling continued to exist in appearance, but this continuity underwent a profound structural transformation. While the ritualistic and symbolic dimensions of wrestling were preserved, its functional role within educational systems, federative structures, and sports policies significantly diminished (Zelyurt, 2013). The state's desire to regulate and control sport during the modernization process also impacted wrestling. In this context, oil wrestling—particularly from the mid-20th century onward—became a component of festivals, municipal events, and national celebrations. Thus, it was no longer treated as an institutionalized sport but transformed into a cultural representation. The Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival, inscribed by UNESCO in 2010 as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, has become the most visible symbol of this representation (Kahraman, 1997). Following UNESCO recognition, oil wrestling became a tool

of Turkey's cultural diplomacy, used in international promotional activities by local governments, the Ministry of Culture, and various public institutions. However, rather than enhancing its capacity to reproduce the educational, spiritual, and social values it contains, this form of preservation has fixed wrestling at a symbolic level. The values associated with *pehlivanlık*—such as asceticism, patience, modesty, and ethical conduct—have survived only in limited ceremonial displays (Yıldıran, 2000). Saydam (2024) notes that in modern urban planning, traditional sports as cultural heritage are often represented symbolically but lack the infrastructure and sustainable organization models to support their continuity. While arenas, fields, and gyms are built for wrestling, the socio-cultural mechanisms needed to sustain the inner dynamics of the tradition are often absent. Oil wrestling events organized in urban settings have shifted from being communal gatherings to becoming aesthetic spectacles aimed at tourists. Media is one of the most influential factors shaping the contemporary representations of wrestling. Wrestling broadcasts on national television are limited in airtime and generally confined to festival days. As a result, wrestling is no longer a vehicle for transmitting knowledge to the broader public, but rather a passive, unexamined folkloric display devoid of historical context (Vatandaş & Vatandaş, 2023). On social media platforms, content related to wrestling is largely restricted to nostalgic imagery and local promotional videos, which weakens the depth of cultural transmission. There are also institutional contradictions concerning the current representations of wrestling. The Turkish Wrestling Federation's focus on freestyle wrestling has led to oil wrestling being supported mainly by local governments' cultural departments or folkloric branches. This institutional structure disrupts the dual development of wrestling and leaves the traditional form undefined within the modern sports system. Wrestling today is preserved symbolically under its cultural heritage status. However, this preservation is not supported by systematic steps to sustain it as a living tradition. The historical role, social discipline, and educational function of *pehlivanlık* appear to have been confined to ceremonial representations. The continuity of cultural heritage depends not only on promotion and visual display, but also on meaningful transmission, educational institutions, and the establishment of active and contemporary links with society. Otherwise, wrestling will cease to be a living culture and will instead become a nostalgically remembered artifact of the past.

Conclusion

This study has revealed the multi-layered transformation of wrestling from a physical activity into a form of cultural heritage throughout the historical continuum from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey. In the Ottoman intellectual framework, the body was not limited to physical performance; it was understood as a construct carrying moral, religious, and social meanings. Within this value system, wrestling was regarded as a practice where physical discipline and spiritual refinement were intertwined, and *pehlivanlık* (heroic wrestling) was defined not by physical strength alone but by moral character. With the advent of modernization, the body's role in public life was redefined, and sport became an instrument for shaping society. In this context, wrestling was reorganized within institutional structures in line with the modern conception of sport. However, this reorganization weakened its traditional functions. *Pehlivanlık* was reduced to a visual symbol of national identity and confined to ceremonial spaces outside the federative systems. While sports policies in the Republican

period were based on the biopolitical regulation of the body, traditional practices such as wrestling were relegated to representational roles outside this regulatory scope. Events like Kırkpınar, recognized by UNESCO as cultural heritage, safeguarded the symbolic value of wrestling. Yet this form of preservation has not provided a sufficient foundation for the continuity of its traditional content. Strategic approaches needed to maintain wrestling's functional sustainability through educational institutions, federative bodies, and media platforms have remained limited. Today, the representation of wrestling is shaped more by its touristic appeal than by its role in cultural continuity. Although festivals supported by local governments and public institutions still bring wrestling to public audiences, these representations risk reducing the historical depth of pehlivanlık to mere ceremonial displays unless they are reinforced by educational and socio-cultural mechanisms that carry on the tradition. Within the sports system shaped by modernization, the function of traditional wrestling will remain limited to symbolic representation unless it is reconfigured without breaking from its historical reality. Ultimately, wrestling has never been merely a sport; it has functioned as a cultural matrix shaping societal value systems, conceptions of the ideal individual, and collective identity. Sustaining this tradition requires more than symbolic preservation—it demands renewed engagement through education, transmission institutions, and local communities. Otherwise, wrestling will cease to exist as a living tradition and remain only as a commemorated relic of the past.

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