Where do the Children Play? Some Thoughts on Toys in the Ancient Near East during the 3rd Millennium BCE

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Abstract
This article will briefly explore the material culture associated with infancy and childhood, focusing on object categories that can be potentially interpreted as playthings, such as clay rattles, spinning tops, whistles, and miniature vessels. These specific categories of objects are discussed considering their occurrence in child's graves, as well as in domestic and cultic assemblages dating to the 3rd millennium BC in Mesopotamia, South-Eastern Anatolia, and the Levant. The article will review the variety of interpretation proposed for them arguing for multi-functional use, including that related to potential playthings. References to contemporary literary and iconographic sources, as well as to later 2nd-1st millennia BC case-studies, from the Ancient Near East and beyond will be made to widen the discussion.

1. Studies on Children and Childhood[1]

While children are not rare in the ancient Near Eastern (henceforth, ANE) archaeological and textual evidence, they have been only sparsely studied, and the actual potential they hold for the investigation of past societies still remains largely unexploited (Garroway 2014). Over the past two decades, growing attention has been paid to gender studies and, especially since the 1980-1990s, research has shifted its focus towards social categories that have been long neglected, such as women and children (Durand 1987; Bolger 2008). For the most part, targeted studies on ANE children and childhood arose after the 1980s and were twofold: those concerned with textual evidence – which

1 I wish to warmly thank Valentina Oselini and Mohammed Alkhaled for their help in collecting data on 3rd millennium BC child burials from Syria and Mesopotamia, and to Valentina Oselini for providing me the GIS map of burials mentioned in the text. A special thank is also addressed to the editors of the volume for inviting me to participate in this volume and to the anonymous referee for providing me valuable suggestions and insights on ancient Egypt.

analyse terminology mostly related to age, gender, socio-economic classes, labour engagement and life conditions, childhood diseases and children's intellectual and physical training – and those focused on archaeological evidence and material culture, which concentrated on aspects concerning iconographic representations and funerary practices (Théodoridès *et al.* 1980; Capomacchia, Zocca 2019). Conversely, aspects related to children' s games have been rarely addressed in past and recent studies, a trend which is mainly due to the sparsely available documentation and the uncertainties in interpreting playthings (see Hübner 1992 for toys in Iron Age Southern Levant).

In this article, I will discuss the material culture possibly associated with infancy and childhood by concentrating on aspects related to children's games drawn from the available archaeological, iconographic, and textual evidence. The focus is on 3rd millennium BC contexts from Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and the Levant, although references to later 2nd-1st millennia BC case-studies will be also addressed to widen the discussion. Some categories of objects will be selected, and I will review the different interpretations proposed for them, including those related to potential playthings.

Overall, the investigation of ludus in ANE societies, i.e. how and for how-long children spent their free-time in playing activities, should incorporate the analysis of specific aspects such as age and gender categories, understood as cultural constructs strictly related to both physiological and social aspects that may vary greatly across time and space (Kamp 2001). In this respect, childhood is not only biologically, but mainly also socially defined according to the cultural connotation of children's developmental stages and their "social age". Similarly, sex/gender differentiation can be understood not only as a biological difference, but notably as a cultural interpretation of sexual diversity (Baxter 2005). During the 3rd millennium BC, the definition of breakpoints in childhood developmental stages can be mainly reconstructed through textual evidence coming from literate societies of Northern and Southern Mesopotamia and the Northern Levant (i.e., Tell Mardikh/Ebla). According to cuneiform texts, different stages of childhood can be detected, ranging from new-born to child and youth. Specific age-grade terms occur in written sources, such as weaned children (Sum. dumu:EN), babies (Sum. $ŠA_3$, Akk. *šerru*), children and sons (Sum. dumu, tur, $banda_3$, Akk. *ṣuḫāru*), and minor (Sum. lu_2 tur-ra). As for sex/gender, a distinction among female (Sum. munus) and male (Sum. $nita_x$(KUR)) children occurs, although the term dumu is often used regardless of biological gender to convey offspring and kinship relationships (Verderame 2017: 133-134; Bartash 2018a). Young adult male (Sum. ĝuruš, Akk. *ṣuḫru*) and woman (Sum. $geme_2$, Akk. *ṣuḫartu*) are also distinguished (Bartash 2018a).[2]

2 A rich vocabulary related to children is also attested in the private archives of Assyrian merchants found in the kārum of Kültepe/Kanesh and dating to the beginning of the 2nd

According to Bartash (2018a: 14-15, fig. 3), a fourfold system of age grades reflecting biosocial life can be detected in 3rd millennium BC Southern Mesopotamia texts; it encompasses infants and children, unmarried adolescents, and adults, married adult individuals and elders. Important turning points are represented by both reproductive age and social condition, the latter involving marriage with a consequent change in the legal status of an individual in the society. A further age grade system can be deduced from administrative texts, and it is based on the labour value of an individual, which ranges from non-exploitable (new-born and babies) to exploitable (children), full workers (youths and adults) and individuals with limited labour value (elders) (Bartash 2018a: 16, fig. 4). Yet, it is not always easy to define the threshold between the different age categories and absolute age in years, even though weaning seems to have occurred around 2-3 years and it seems that children began to participate in working tasks at the age of about 5-7 years, being considered youths or young adults when they reached 12/14 years (onset of puberty) and were of marriageable age (Ziegler 1997; Englund 2009; Bartash 2018a: 16; Justel 2018: 59-82).

Thus, playtime, understood as a fundamental aspect of children's cognitive and physical development, should have characterised the life course of a child at least from birth to puberty, if not earlier to the age of 5-7 years, when children began their apprenticeship in family-run workshops or farms, as well as in public institutions (e.g. scribes, valets, *etc.* working for public institutions such as temples and palaces). Children from unprivileged social strata, such as orphans, sons of slaves and debtors, prisoner of war, and deportees, were obliged to work even at a younger age (4-5 years) becoming dependant on public institutions in exchange of salary or shelter (Bartash 2018b).[3] On the other hand, children from the high-ranking milieu could also be entrusted with tasks of responsibility at a young age, as in the case of Assurbanipal (668-630 BC), who succeeded his father Esarhaddon to the throne of Assyria when he was a child. The king's childhood, described in several tablets kept in Nineveh's archives and especially in his autobiographical inscriptions,[4] was characterized by an intense intellectual and physical training including scribal education, initiation to the practices of exorcism and training in the lion hunt and martial arts, political business, and royal etiquette (Villard 1997; Zamazalová 2011). Those children

millennium BC (Michel 1997). See also Pezzulla 2020 for the tentative identification of age categories in iconographic representations.

3 More information about working age can be gathered from Neo-Babylonian texts from the temple of Šamaš at Sippar where we have mentions of young dependant workers employed as arborists working at the age of 4-5 years (Joannès 1997: 120-121).

4 The Ashurbanipal *res gestae* are inscribed on several hundred clay prisms discovered in the North Palace of Nineveh; passages related to the childhood of the Assyrian king occurs especially in inscription "L" and in the so-called Rassam Prism from the name of the archaeologist, Hormuzd Rassam, who discovered it during the excavations in the North Palace of Nineveh) .

seem to have spent a limited time in playing activities, soon becoming "young adults".

Cuneiform texts occasionally mention playtime and overall children are rarely attested in Mesopotamian literature, with the exception of the wisdom literature with reference to pedagogical aspects (Verderame 2017). Thus, while child-training, education and labour are dealt with in cuneiform texts, a relevant part of children's lives involving playing activities mostly escapes our knowledge. A notable exception is represented by a Middle Babylonian tablet (HS 1893), classified as a praise text with an address to the city of Babylon. In the tablet a variety of activities interpreted as children's games is listed. The narrating voice, even if not explicitly mentioned, should be Ištar and the activities described appear to be related to the cult of the goddess (Kilmer 1991; Zomer 2019). The tablet contains in a single column two separate lists of boys/young men and girls/maiden's games. The section related to young boys enlists physical actions such as jumping, running, throwing and strength-demonstrating games; terms such as «the rogue one, the proud one, and the acrobat» are employed besides verbs like taunting, mockery and hiding. The winner is described as «the one who dances», while the loser «beats (his) breast» (Zomer 2019: 51-52, v. 14-15).

In the following list concerning girls' activities, housework, hair combing and dressing games are enumerated; in this section verbs are used in the imperative form, entailing games where girls command each other to perform specific tasks, such as «stir-up-my-dust!». Other girl games entail taunting boys, making use of verbs such as «attack!», and «escape-him!» (Zomer 2019: 51-52, v. 20). The light-heartedness of the girls contrasts with a passage of the Myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal, where the goddess of the Netherworld regrets her sad childhood: «since I was a little girl, I have not known the play of maidens, nor have I known the frolic of little girl» (Foster 2005: 18).

The Middle Babylonian tablet represents a unique text describing games in daily life. Besides free-body and imagination games, objects employed as playthings in the text are the skipping rope (*ḫeppû*), stick-dice, and astragali (*ḫiṣallu*).

A further mention of playthings can be found in the *Gilgameš Epic* known in different versions, the most famous of which is the standard Babylonian epic (George 2003). In the *Gilgameš Epic*, the hero Gilgameš – son of the goddess Ninsun and the king Lugalbanda – is already grown-up, although he refuses to come of age; he left the city of Uruk and spent his time amid amazing adventures, encounters, and battles with mythical creatures (such as Humbaba in the Forest of Cedar), which he faced together with his wild friend Enkidu. However, throughout the tale, Gilgameš progressively achieves adulthood and eventually returns to the city of Uruk, exchanging the light-heartedness of youth for parenthood and social burdens. Scholars have dealt with the many possible readings of the different versions of the *Gilgameš Epic*, disclosing literary *topoi* such as the life-stages and age-specific behaviours, and the literary significance of the

journey as a rite passage, or liminal transition, involving changing age and social status, with the final aggregation of the mature Gilgameš into the community (Harris 2000: 37; Rendu Loisel 2020: 233-235).

In one of the five poems of the earliest Sumerian version (*Bilgames and the Netherworld*) – later incorporated into the XII tablet of the standard Babylonian version – Gilgameš, whose name appears as Bilgames, manufactures a *pukku* and a *mekkû*, probably a ball and a mallet, from the wood of a haunted tree that the hero freed from the creatures of evil for the Goddess Inanna (George 2000: 176; 2003: 528-530, 898-900). Bilgames then begins to play with the young men of Uruk with the *pukku* and *mekkû* in the city street making noise to the point that the inhabitants of Uruk complained to the gods, and the playthings are thrown into a hole and down into the Netherworld.

> The sons of his city who had come with him lopped off its branches, lashed them together. To his sister, holy Inanna, he gave wood for her throne, he gave wood for her bed. For himself its base he made into his ball, its branch he made into his mallet. Playing with the ball he took it out in the city square, playing with the ... he took it out in the city square. The young men of his city began playing with the ball, with him mounted piggy-back on a band of widows' sons. "O my neck! O my hips!" they groaned. The son who had a mother, she brought him bread, the brother who had a sister, she poured him water. When evening was approaching he drew a mark where his ball had been placed, he lifted it up before him and carried it off to his house. At dawn, where he had made the mark, he mounted piggy-back, but at the complaint of the widows and the outcry of the young girls, his ball and his mallet both fell down to the bottom of the Netherworld. (George 2000: 183, *Bilgames and the Netherworld*, v. 145-164)

Bilgames seems to act as a child, weeping and crying for his lost playthings «O my *ball!* O my *mallet!* O my *ball,* which I have not enjoyed to the full! O my ..., with which I have not had my fill of play!» (George 2000: 183, *Bilgames and the Netherworld*, v. 169-171).

The exact meaning and use of these playthings is not known, although it seems that they were employed in a sort of game or sport (like modern polo) played by Gilgameš and the young men of Uruk (George 2003: 449). Similarities can be found in ancient Egypt, in gaming scenes depicted in several tombs, such as those of the Beni Hasan necropolis dating to the Middle Kingdom (Deckers 1992: figs 77, 83). According to Deckers (1992: 113-115), two types of ball games can be recognised based on figurative scenes: the first involves catching and juggling games (exclusively associated with women), while the second seems to have required the use of a bat by male figures. In the temple of Hatshepsut, Tuthmosis III is depicted standing before the god Hathor and holding a ball and a bat (Decker 1992: fig. 78). Interestingly, in similar scenes accompanied by hieroglyphic inscriptions occurring in later Ptolemaic temples,

the king is described as holding a bat and a ball, enjoying himself «as a boy, a youngster, a child» (Borghouts 1973: 132), reminding us of the childish behaviour of the Mesopotamian hero.[5]

The rare mentions of playthings in Mesopotamian texts introduce us to the difficult question of archaeological visibility of games and gaming in the ANE, especially when related to another almost invisible component of ancient Near Eastern societies represented by children.[6]

2. Child-related Objects and Playthings: Archaeological Contexts and Problems of Definition

The identification of toys as specific forms of child-related material culture is a complicated task. Objects generally interpreted as toys encompass clay rattles, miniature vessels, figurines, and small carts with wheels (Kilmer 1993; Kamp 2001; Crawford 2009). However, there is no unequivocal interpretation of these objects as child-related in the published literature. In fact, their function and meaning may vary considerably depending on the context in which they were used, resulting in different interpretations ranging from toys to utilitarian items and objects with a ritual purpose and significance (Tooley 1991; Moorey 2004: 10-11; Tamm 2013).

Following Crawford (2009: 55) «being toys is a potential characteristic of all objects within a child's environment». Overall, every object can be transformed into a plaything and even children could have produced their own toys, such as mud or clay figurines, and miniature small vessels (§2.1-2). Some authors have explored the role of children as both toy makers and users; they investigated the archaeological evidence of their agency, recognizable, for instance, in fingerprints left by children on wet clay or in use wear and breakage patterns observable on clay figurines (Hutson 2015). Ethnographic examples of hand-made toys modelled by children have been documented by E.L. Ochsenschlager (2004) in villages of the Marsh Arab in years 1968-69. These include sun-dried mud figurines manufactured by children of different ages, starting from 3-4 years old, and reproducing common animals (such as sheep, camel, horse, dog, water buffalo and chicken), but also uncommon wild

5 The representation of the king with a bat and a ball has been connected with the myth of Apophis, where the king blinds the god with a ball, probably made of wood (Decker 1992: 115). For the origin and development of the myth see Borghouts 1973, with main bibliographical references to iconographic representations and hieroglyphic inscriptions.

6 Adults' games are better known from archaeological findings and iconography and encompass, for instance, gameboards which have been found in Egypt from the pre-Dynastic period (mid-4th millennium BC) and in Mesopotamia and Iran from the Early Bronze Age (3rd millennium BC), such as the Egyptian Senet or the Sumerian Twenty Squares or Royal Game of Ur found in grave PG 513 of the Ur necropolis (Finkel 2007; Crist *et al.* 2015). Other gaming objects include dies and knucklebones, also interpreted as instruments of divination (Finkel 2007: 27-28; Beeri *et al.* 2010).

species such as lions, schematic human figures, houses, and vehicles, such as wagons and boats (Ochsenschlager 2004: 79-85, figs 5.7-11).[7]

Besides "visible" child-related objects, other "invisible" children toys made of organic substances, which have not survived in the archaeological record, must have existed (Crawford 2000: 174). Examples of toys made of perishable materials from ancient Egypt – where climatic conditions have favoured their preservation – are in fact well-attested. These include wooden spinning-tops, leather, or wooden balls, and jump-ropes made of organic fibres discovered in domestic and funerary contexts dating from the Pre-Dynastic period to the Roman age (Janssen *et al.* 2007; Decker 1992: 111-135).[8] Exemplars of children's toys were found, for instance, in a Pre-Dynastic child's grave (tomb no. 100) in the Naqada necropolis (Petrie *et al.* 1986: 35, pl. VII), and at the site of Kahun in domestic contexts dating to the 12th Dynasty (early 2nd millennium BC) (David 1979: 12-15; 2003: 371). It is worth mentioning the finding in the Tomb of Hemaka at Saqqara, dating to the 1st Dynasty (ca. 3000-2900 BC) and pertaining to an adult individual, of a wooden box containing wooden disks (with one side convex and the other flattened) kept together with small sticks, some of which inserted into the perforations of the disks and likely used as spinning tops (Emery 1938: 13, 28-29).

As a complement to archaeological materials, gaming scenes occur in several tombs dating from the Old Kingdom onwards. One of the most representative is the depiction, accompanied by inscriptions, of different types of gaming appropriate for children in the tomb of Kheti at Beni Hasan (tomb no. 17) dated to the 11th Dynasty, between the late 3rd and the early 2nd millennium BC. These encompass guessing games, with little sticks or pair of pots, throwing and hoop games (Decker 1992: 121-124, fig. 83).

In the ANE, toys made of organic materials are archeologically invisible due to the climatic conditions of the region and this probably accounts for the scarcity of contextual finding and the restricted number of object types potentially interpreted as playthings that are mostly made of backed clay.

Overall, archaeological contexts where children are physically visible are represented by graves. From a child-oriented perspective, burials – especially single depositions – could be meaningful archaeological contexts to observe relevant associations between age-at-death, sex, burial type, and grave goods. However, it should be remarked that in excavation reports, and especially in old excavations, information regarding the age-at-death (based on skeletal and dental development) are not consistently mentioned, and sex determination is even more rare

7 On children play with self-made objects in Greek and Roman world see especially Lambrugo forthcoming.

8 Exemplars of tops from later Roman contexts are well-represented by the findings from the domestic contexts at Tebtynis, Fayyum (Gallazzi and Hadji-Minaglou 2019: 213, cat. no. 141).

since it requires expensive DNA studies (Brown 2015).[9] Moreover, osteological remains pertaining to children are generally more affected by bone deterioration.

Particular artefact types that are never, or only rarely, attested in adult burials, while occurring in children graves, can be more plausibly interpreted as toys. Yet, the occurrence of actual plaything in child graves is nonetheless rare in funerary contexts dating to the 3rd millennium BCE throughout the ANE, and overall burial objects were almost never left in infant and child graves, suggesting some level of horizontal stratification, as well as specific patterns of children's social integration into the community. In interpreting children graves, some scholars have also emphasised the role of adults in manipulating burials and creating the mortuary context, thus reflecting ritual aspects related to death and beliefs of the afterlife, as well as adults' behaviours towards childhood and premature deaths (Parker Pearson 2001: 102-104; Garroway 2014: 25).

Actually, child burials show a high variability in funerary ritual. The most attested typology of Early Bronze Age burials consists of inhumations in simple pits and *enchytrismòs* located within settlements, under the floors of domestic or public spaces or in abandoned areas, suggesting a different treatment for adults and children. Ceramic containers employed as children's burials usually encompass jars, pots, or pithoi, often consisting of two different fragmentary vessels, with one used to accommodate the body and the other to cover it. However, cases of extramural infant/child burials are also attested, especially when they occur in multiple depositions in association with adults.[10] When present, the most common funerary equipment consists of necklaces or bracelets made of stone and shell beads, ceramic vessels, and metal implements. In some cases, particular objects such as clay rattles and miniature vessels can be also found (§ 3.1-2). The occurrence of specific object categories in funerary contexts related to children may allow us to propose a toy function for some findings (§ 3.1-2). Yet, similar objects have been also discovered in domestic contexts where, nevertheless, gendered activity areas cannot be certainly reconstructed, and the possible toy function thus becomes disputed. Based on ethnographic examples from villages in the Marsh Arab, Ochsenschlager (2004: 88-89) observes that abandoned toys can be found in a number of different locations, including courtyards, canals, and marshes, and even scattered in the fields.

9 Studies on human remains generally appear on final excavation reports and targeted articles especially those from recent excavations in the Euphrates and Jazirah areas by A. Soltysiak.

10 In extramural cemeteries in the Middle Euphrates Valley children are consistently less numerous than adults, while they occur as intramural depositions (Bouso 2015). For instance, in the Early Middle Euphrates 2a (EME 2a) extra muros cemetery at Hassek Höyük, among 97 graves only 3 pertain to children; conversely, the number of children buried inside the settlement is higher amounting to 26 depositions contra 1 youth and 12 adults (Bouso 2015: 379). For Early Bronze Age burials in the Jazirah and Tigris regions see Valentini 2011, 2019. See Massa 2014 for a throughout study of Early Bronze Age burials in the Central Anatolian plateau during the 3rd millennium BC and Bachhuber 2015.

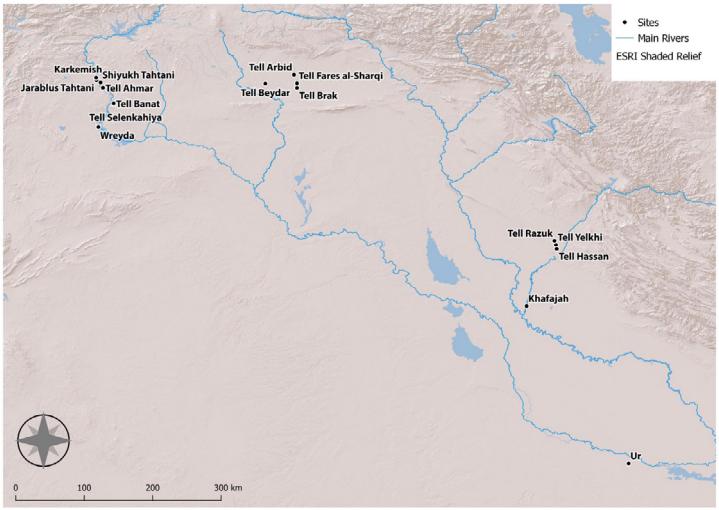
3. Children and Playthings

Overall, targeted studies on children's burials are rare and information can be gathered from the general literature on funerary customs and excavation reports on ANE cemeteries.[11] In this article I have selected and analysed a total number of 189 burials containing children graves from several sites dating to the 3rd millennium BC, located along the Euphrates (Jerablus Tahtani, Tell Banat, Tell Selenkahiye, Tell Ahmar, Tell Ashara/Terqa, Carchemish, Shiyukh Tahtani), in the Jazirah (Rad Shaqra, Tall Arbid, Tell Beydar, Tell Brak, Tell Fares al-Sharqi) and in Central-Southern Mesopotamia (Khafajah, Tell Hassan, Tell Razuk, Yelkhi) in order to quantify the occurrence of potential child-related objects and their direct association with children (fig. 1). Overall, the selected sample encompasses children's graves (infants, children, youngsters, and pre-adults, ranging from 0 to 14 years) located in residential neighbourhoods (half of the sample), abandoned areas and, to a lesser extent, in extra-mural cemeteries. Out of 189 graves, 153 are single depositions, while the remaining sample (36) encompasses multiple burials (with one or more than one adult plus one or more children).[12] The majority of graves are simple pits and depositions in ceramic containers (especially for single child burials), with few chamber tombs and shaft graves representative of multiple depositions. Slightly less than half of the total children graves (ca. 44%) are furnished with a funerary assemblage, mainly consisting of ceramic vessels, ornaments including necklaces made of stone, terracotta and metal beads and shells, metal pins, earrings, and bracelets.[13] Some of the graves have particular grave goods such as terracotta figurines, clay rattles, whistles, and castanets, models of boats and miniature vessels. The latter categories of objects could have functioned as playthings, even if their occurrence in other contexts – as it will be discussed in the following paragraphs – opens up to different interpretations. The brief outline given below is an approach to the identification of a child-related material culture in the 3rd millennium BC ANE moving from their direct association in funerary contexts (mainly single internment were selected) and discussing particular object categories that occur in the children graves here analysed. However, a thorough study is needed, considering a wider sample, as well as a statistical analysis of grave goods occurring in children versus adult burials (see Kohut 2011). Besides potential playthings occurring in children's graves, other materials will be considered to widen the discussion (§ 3.1).

11 See Pezzulla 2018 for an analysis of children's burial and associated material culture in Mesopotamia and Syria dating to different chronological periods with a focus on 3rd millennium BC burials.

12 Out of 290 individuals buried in the 189 single and multiple graves considered in this study, 250 depositions pertain to children.

13 Multiple burials have not considered in this count due to the difficulty in associating grave goods to individuals.



Site	No. of burials considered	Type of burial	Total no. of individuals	Total no. of children	Bibliography
Jerablus Tahtani	31	Single and Multiple	111	85	Peltenburg 2015
Tell Banat	5	Single and Multiple	14	3	Porter 1995; 2002
Tell Selenkhahiye and Wreyde	18	Single and Multiple	22	21	Van Loon 2001
Tell Ahmar	5	Single	5	5	Dugay 2005
Terqa	10	Single and Multiple	11	11	Tomczyk, Sołtysiak 2015
Rad Shaqra	13	Single and Multiple	14	14	Sołtysiak 2006
Tell Arbid	31	Single	31	31	Sołtysiak, Koliński 2012; Wygnanska 2018
Tell Fares al-Sharqi	1	Single	1	1	Sołtysiak 2010
Tell Beydar	29	Single	29	29	Van der Stede 2007; Bertoldi 2014
Khafajah	30	Single and Multiple	36	34	Delougaz, Hill, Lloyd 1967
Yelkhi	2	Single	2	2	Fiorina 2007
Hassan	1	Single	1	1	Fiorina 2007
Tell Razuk	2	Single	2	2	Starr 1939
Tell Rijim	1	Single	1	1	Bielinski 2003
Shiyukh Tahtani	3	Single	3	3	Sconzo 2006
Carchemish	7	Single	7	7	Falzone, Sconzo 2007

Fig. 1. Map with 3rd millennium BC child's burials quoted in the text (Author's elaboration).

3.1. Clay Objects: Spinning Tops, Rattles, and Flutes

Spinning-tops have been one of the most popular child's games worldwide since antiquity. While spinning tops are found in archaeological contexts in Egypt,[14] in the ANE they are usually rare, probably because they were mainly manufactured in perishable materials as the Egyptian contemporary findings seem to suggest (David 2003: 371 with illustration of wooden tops from the Kahun tombs kept at the Manchester Museum). A rare iconographic representation of children playing with tops is depicted on basalt stelae from Carchemish (Hogarth 1914: pl. B 7 1:10). The stelae, dating to the beginning of the 8th century BC (around 790 BC), are part of the sculptural cycle of the Royal Buttress of the King's Gate complex. The reliefs converge towards a

14 See also *supra*, Piacentini, Delli Castelli in this volume.

central monumental inscription of Yaris, serving as regent of Carchemish for the young king Kamanis (Hogarth 1914: pl. 7:b; Gilibert 2011: 19-54, figs 19-20). The stelae display on the façade Yaris with the adolescent crown prince Kamani, armed and dressed like an adult, and his eight brothers "represented in different stages of childhood" including a baby learning how to walk, five children with short hair, and two youths with long hair (Gilibert 2011: 49). The five children hold or play with a spinning top, while the two youth are playing with astragali. The tops have an acorn-like shape and are of the type set in motion with the aid of a string rope coiled around the body; these tops may be thrown forward while firmly grasping the end of the string, that can be also secured to a whip, and pulling it back (fig. 2). According to Gilibert (2022) the iconography of young princes playing with toys could be set in a ceremonial context of royal investiture and the toys could have served as oracular instruments to obtain favourable omen for their heir apparent. The connection between play and divinatory practices is known also in Mesopotamia, as suggested by literary texts dating to the 2nd millennium BC (Rendu Loisel 2020).

Fig. 2. Royal Buttress of the King's Gate complex, stelae with the royal children at play (after Hogarth 1914: pl. 7:b).

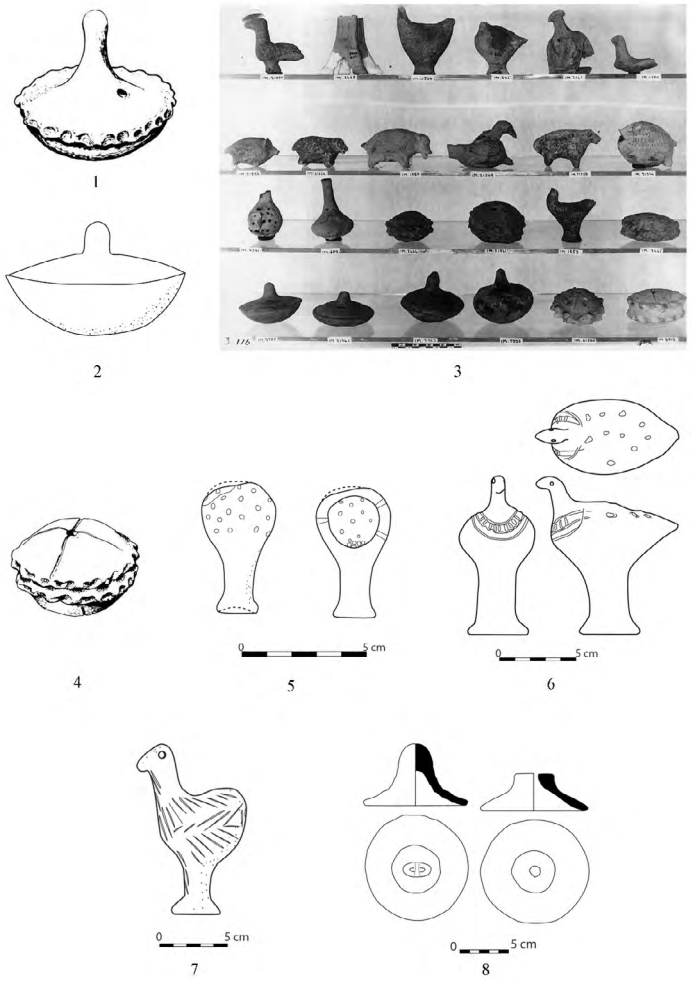


Fig. 3. Spinning tops, clay rattles, whistles and castanets: **1)** probable clay spinning-top (redrawn after Woolley 1955: Fig. 16b, not to scale); **2)** showcase of the Baghdad Museum (redrawn after Ochsenschlager 2004: fig. 5.16); **3)** object IM 3759 from grave PG 138 of the Ur Necropolis (redrawn after the Woolley's original catalogue card accessible from the Ur project website, http://ur.iaas.upenn.edu/, not to scale); **4)** pie-crust rattle from Ur (redrawn after Woolley 1955: Fig. 16b, not to scale); **5)** rattle with a cylindrical stem from Halawa A (redrawn after Meyer *et al.* 1994: fig. 61:10); **6)** bird-shaped rattle from grave T5 at Tell Arbid (redrawn after Bieliński 2004: fig. 4); **7)** bird-shaped whistle from grave U:1 at Tell Bi'a/Tuttul (redrawn after Rittig 2010: pl. 86:1); **8)** castanets from grave U:1 at Tell Bi'a/Tuttul (redrawn after Strommenger *et al.* 1998: pl. 103:12-13).

To my knowledge, there is no targeted study on spinning tops from the ANE and mentions of tops from 3rd millennium BC contexts are extremely rare.[15] A peculiar object published by Sir L. Woolley and retrieved in an unspecified filling layer dating to the 3rd millennium BC in Pit W at Ur is described by the author as a «clay rattle or top» (Woolley 1955: 76, fig. 16a, here fig. 3:1). Woolley refers to an illustration depicting two different objects, one of which is definitely a piecrust rattle (see below; fig. 3:4). For the former object, a tentative interpretation as a top can be proposed (fig. 3:1).

The same piece is described also by A. Tamm (2013: 154, no. 25) as «rather extraordinary» exemplars of a lentil shaped rattle with a single crest, a hole on the upper part and a vertical handle. Although the decoration in a form of a crest is similar to that applied on piecrust rattles, the overall shape and the occurrence of a knob and a rounded bottom differ from that of quite standardised piecrust rattles; moreover, the presence of pebbles is not mentioned. Similar objects from Southern Mesopotamia are kept in the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad and can be recognised in a photograph published by E.L. Ochsenschlager of objects displayed in the museum in 1973 (Ochsenschlager 2004: fig. 5.16; here fig. 3.3). The photograph depicts a show case with several clay animal figurines, whistles, and rattles, while in the lower shelve there are three objects (from the bottom left the first, the third and fourth) that can be tentatively interpreted as spinning tops, rather than rattles or figurines, due to their biconical or lentil-shaped body with a rounded bottom and a vertical knob applied on the top (fig. 3:3). Unfortunately, the identification of the archaeological context is possible only for one object (IM 3759), while for the others, a provenance from the site of Tell Muqqayar/Ur can be merely postulated. Object IM 3759 is described in Woolley's original catalogue cards – accessible from the Ur project website[16] – as a pinkish baked clay pot lid with a knob handle (fig. 3:2). The finding context is a grave (PG 138), excavated in Trial Trench E (TTE), which cuts across the area of the 3rd millennium BC Royal Cemetery of Ur. Unfortunately, graves discovered in this sector are badly documented and more information about PG 138 cannot be obtained (Nissen 1966: 165). The objects are quite small, ca. 8-10 cm in diameter (at the maximum expansion) and the overall shape, with a rounded bottom, is hardly functional for a lid, which is generally characterised by a hollowed inner profile. However, the lid function cannot be rejected since similar, but larger objects, have been found and interpreted as pierced lids to close vessels used for fermentation.[17] Nevertheless,

15 See Hübner 1992: 86-89 for spinning tops in the Southern Levant during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. According to the author, both gods (such as Hermes) and children play with terracotta and wooden tops and these objects were deposited as ex-voto in sanctuaries but can be also found in graves and domestic contexts.

16 http://ur.iaas.upenn.edu/

17 I wish to thank Andrea Polcaro for the information he provided me with about some exemplars coming from Tell Zurghul/Nigin in Southern Mesopotamia and the specimens kept

a multifunctional interpretation of these objects, both as lids and spinning tops, cannot be excluded even if additional data are needed to further elaborate on the hypothesis of a toy function for these objects.

Another category of potential child-related objects is represented by clay rattles, which are idiophones producing indirect sound through the vibration of the instrument that contains clay pellets, pebbles, or seeds (Dumbrill 2007). The earliest exemplars are attested in Neolithic contexts, such as the one recovered in an infant burial from Tepe Gawra level XVII/XVI (ca. 5300-5000 BC) together with a clay figurine of a mouflon (Locus 7-37, Tobler 1950: 116, pl. LXXXII:b). During the 3rd millennium BC three main types of rattles are attested in Anatolia, Syria, and Mesopotamia: the fructiform or piecrust, the ball-shaped and the zoomorphic rattles (Pruß 1999; Gorris 2012).

The first type is common in Southern Mesopotamia, Syria, and Iran, where it occurs in contexts dating from the mid-3rd to the 2nd millennium BC (Tamm 2013; fig. 3:4). These baked-clay rattles, with diameters between 6-10 cm and about 3-6 cm thick, have a lentil shape, with one or two crests in the middle and more or less pronounced spikes. They are either manufactured from two separates hemispheres, then joined with a lump of clay, or from a single clay lump; they are perforated on one or both halves and some of them bear two incised lines on the top with a perforation at the cross point (Tamm 2013: 138-139). Pie-crust rattles were mainly found in residential areas at Ur, Kish, Nippur, Tello, Adab, Tell Asmar and Tell Agrab (Mesopotamia), Susa and Haft Tappeh (south-western Iran). Few exemplars were also found in cultic contexts (e.g., the Snake Shrine at Tell Asmar and the Ishtar temple at Mari), and in workshop areas (Ur, *Diqdiqqah*) dating to the late 3rd millennium BC, as well as in public buildings, such as the XVIII cent. BC palace of Zimri-Lim at Mari.[18]

The second type encompasses rattles with a cylindrical stem (ca. 8-10 cm) and a spherical hollowed and pierced body. They are manufactured in two pieces, the stem and the lower body, the latter filled with small stone or clay spheres and then joined with the spherical upper body. This simple rattle type is documented from the 3rd to the 1st millennium BC in Mesopotamia and the Levant (Pruß 1999: 57-59; Gorris 2012; fig. 3:5). Exemplars dating to the 3rd millennium BC are mainly found in domestic contexts in Northern Mesopotamia and along the Middle Euphrates Valley, e.g. at Tell Brak (Mc Donald 2001: fig. 490: 95-96), Tell Halawa A (Meyer *et al.* 1994: figs 60-61: 9-11), Tell 'Abd (Pruß 2019:

at the Baghdad Museum that could have been also the function of lids given the diameter similar to those of closed shapes.

18 For a description of pie-crust rattles with the catalogue of published exemplars see Tamm 2013 with relevant bibliography.

pl. 26: a-d), Tell Chuera (Pruß 1999: fig. 2: R1-4), and at the site of Hama in the Orontes Valley.[19]

The third type is the zoomorphic rattle, which is common across Mesopotamia, Syria, and Anatolia from the mid-3rd to the late 2nd millennium BC (Rashid 1984: 98; Pruß *et al.* 1994: fig. 46; Pruß 1999: 59-60). The most common is the bird-shaped rattle that displays a hollow globular or expanded body with perforations and a pedestal cylindrical base; the tail and the head are modelled in a bird-like shape, while the body is decorated with incisions recalling the plumage. Exemplars of these kinds of rattles have been found at Tell Arbid (Syria) in association with a rich child grave (Grave 5) dated to the post-Akkadian or late Early Jazirah 4-early Early Jazirah 5 period (henceforth EJZ), ca. 2200 BC (Wygnanska 2018).[20] The child's body (approximately 4-years-old, undetermined sex) was accommodated inside a cooking pot, while the funerary assemblage was placed in the burial cavity. It consisted of six vessels, gold, silver and bronze ornaments, beads, and a terracotta bird-shaped rattle. The rattle is 13.5 cm high and has a cylindrical stand with a hollowed bird on the top; the latter has a pointed tail and an expanded body with ten pierces on the top, two incisions for the eyes and a decoration with three incised lines around the neck (Bieliński 2004: 339, figs 4-5; fig. 3:6).

Comparable specimens (dating to Period EJZ 5) were found at Tell Brak, in Area CH in a surface level covering the houses of the late 3rd millennium BC (Mallowan 1947: pl. LIV:4) at Tell Mozan (Wissing 2009: 355, pls 73:1198, 157:1197), and in EJZ 4 houses at Tell Chuera (Pruß 1999: 70-71, figs 3-4) and Tell Halawa A (Pruß *et al.* 1994: fig. 46). A large number of bird-shaped rattles (13 exemplars) was discovered at the site of Tell Bi'a/Tuttul in a silo and in destruction layers between the royal tombs and Palace B (Rittig 2010: 87-88).

For these idiophones multifunctional interpretations as musical instruments, ritual objects, or toys have been proposed (see Tamm 2013: 140-143). According to A. Pruß (1999), who analysed Early Bronze Age rattles from Syria and Mesopotamia, the frequent occurrence of these idiophones in domestic contexts suggest a mundane use by common people for private cult or magic, as well as for children's toys. A similar interpretation is suggested by Tamm (2013:142) for the rattles uncovered in Mesopotamia and south-western Iran, due to their frequent occurrence in domestic contexts and, to a lesser extent, in private buildings and workshops. Interestingly, R. Dumbrill (2007: 21) noted that some of the pie-crust rattles bear fingerprints of children, who could have

19 The study and publication of rattles from Early Bronze Age houses of levels J8-1 at Hama (ca. 2550-2000 BC) and kept at the National Museum of Denmark is currently under way by the author together with M.M. Hald, S. Lumsden, and G. Mouamar within the Hama Project.

20 For the chronology recently elaborated by the ARCANE Project see www.arcane.uni-tuebingen.de. In this contribution abbreviations for the different regional periodization are employed, including the Early Jazirah (EJZ) and the Middle Euphrates Valley (EME).

taken part in their manufacturing. According to the author, rattles can be considered as musical instruments, played within an "orchestra" (Dumbrill 2007). However, the frequent occurrence of clay rattles in private contexts, including houses and tombs, suggests a larger use within Near Eastern communities, probably both as mundane objects used for playing, for calming children, and as cultic instruments used in exorcisms and domestic apotropaic rituals (Rashid 1984: 98-100; Meyer *et al.* 1994: 198; Gorris 2012). A likely mention of rattles in religious texts can be found in the Late Bronze Age period. Some Hittite religious texts refer to the use of ^{GIŠ}mukar, mukn-, a wooden implement used as a noise maker (interpreted as a *sistrum* or a rattle) to call the Stormgod or generally to summon the gods and scare off evil spirits (Güterbock *et al.* eds 1989: 323-324). Similarly, rattles have been found in Late Bronze Age sanctuaries in the Northern Levant, close to an altar in a temple at Tell Hazor, or in a later Iron Age sanctuary at Horvat Qitmit, where a statue of a goddess was adorned with a rattle on her head, comparable to the most common typology of 1st millennium BC spool-shaped rattles (Gorris 2012: 242).

The mundane and ritual interpretations are not mutually exclusive, as suggested by the finding contexts. In fact, during the Early Bronze Age these idiophones occur in association with children's burials, suggesting a function as child-related objects, as well as in temple contexts, a fact that may indicate a ritual or magical purpose. Their discovery in great numbers in houses is in line with both interpretations; their use in daily life by Near Eastern ordinary people fits well with their deposition in funerary assemblages, where mundane objects can be placed to accompany the deceased in the afterlife. Moreover, their accessibility to the larger public is suggested by their occurrence in pottery workshops where they were manufactured and/or fired together with ordinary vessels. The analysis of clay fabrics suggests similarities to those employed for pottery production, as well as a standardised method of manufacture (Pruß 1999: 67).

Another clay object that has multifunctional uses, among which that of a toy, is the whistle in the shape of a bird (fig. 3:7). This aerophone has a hollowed body with a projection for the handle and the blowhole below the tail. The animal is rendered through a decoration with short, incised lines and dots indicating the plumage, and applied or pierced eyes (Pruß 1999: 61-63). Some exemplars have no handles and two holes on the tail and the back, the second of which may have been used to alter the tone (McDonald 2001: 274, fig. 489: 75). Bird-pipes/flutes have been mainly found in mid to late 3rd millennium BC domestic contexts throughout Mesopotamia, with few exemplars occurring in graves. The latest bird-shaped whistles seem to date to the Ur III period (e.g., Nippur; Legrain 1930: pl. 62: 342). At Tell Bi'a, along the Euphrates, several bird-shaped whistles (30 exemplars) were discovered in residential areas or in secondary contexts, with one specimen retrieved in a child burial (grave U:1) in cemetery U (Strommenger *et al.* 1998: pl. 103: 14; Rittig 2010: 85-87). The

burial, dating to EJZ 5, contained the disturbed remains of a child with only the ribs and the skull preserved; the funerary assemblage consisted of ceramic vessels, beads, a spatula, a bird-shaped whistle and two clay disks interpreted as castanets (Strommenger *et al.* 1998: 84-85; here fig. 3:8). The whistle is 8.1 cm in hight and has a massive base, a hollowed body with a hole on the tail (fig. 3:7). A similar aerophone was found in a stone shaft tomb at Gre Virike (J9/028/G; Ökse 2006: 29, fig. 27; Pruß 2015: fig. 3.7), dating to period Early Middle Euphrates 4/5 (EME 4-5, mid-late 3rd millennium BC) and containing multiple inhumations including three children. According to Pruß (1999: 67-68) these objects could be used as children's toys or as means of communication over long distances.

3.2. Miniature Vessels

Like other categories of clay objects, miniature vessels have been also differently interpreted as ritual or symbolic items, as well as playthings. The meaning of producing miniaturised versions of a common repertoire of shapes remains elusive and a vast bibliography exists on the subject, thus a detailed review goes beyond the scope of this short contribution. Miniature objects are generally considered to have a symbolic, rather than functional meaning, reproducing *realia* in a reduced scale. This category occurs in heterogeneous contexts including graves, domestic, public, and cultic environments (Knappet 2012). In this respect, a multifunctional use can be postulated, and specific functions can be reconstructed based on the archaeological finding context, and through the consideration of the manufacturing techniques and the relationship with contemporary full-size prototypes. The most disputed interpretation is related to their occurrence in settlement contexts (public and domestic areas) for which some authors have proposed a cultic/ritual interpretation, while others have suggested a mundane use such as cosmetic containers or playthings. For example, one case-study that falls into the first category is represented by the occurrence at the site of Khirbet Iskander (Jordan) of a set of miniature vessels in a public space of the Phase B settlement dating to the last quarter of the 3rd millennium BC (Richard 2019). The corpus mostly encompasses miniature vessels related to liquids such as jars, juglets, teapots, cups, and lamps comparable to contemporary full-size vessels, as well as a miniature tin-bronze spearhead. Although the author does not exclude a possible use as toys, a more likely interpretation related to ritualised practices and activities is preferred given the numerous comparisons from contemporary ceremonial or cultic contexts pointing to a «inter-artefactual network of common cultural attitudes and shared traditions» during a period of urban crisis and regeneration in late Early Bronze Age Southern Levantine societies (Richard 2019: 828).

As for the interpretation of miniature vessels as toys, some authors have emphasised the agency of children both as miniature-makers and users. According

to some scholars, the less well-executed clay objects, including hand-made miniature vessels, could have been produced by inexperienced apprentice potters or by children (Crawford 2009). A line of enquiry carried out especially in recent years aims at exploring the bodily presence of children through fingerprint detection on artifacts (Králík *et al.* 2008). Targeted studies on ANE ceramics have revealed the presence of multiple hands in pottery making, distinguishing among adults, adolescents, and juveniles in the manufacture process of particular classes of vessels and objects (Sanders 2015). In particular, recent studies on miniature vessels from domestic contexts at the site of Hama (Syria) revealed the exclusive presence of children fingerprints of about 7-8 years old on miniature vessels, thus suggesting their role as miniature-makers.[21]

Miniature vessels occur relatively frequently, although not exclusively, in children's graves. In the analysed sample, out of 194 children's graves, 22 (11%) contain miniature vessels, ranging from one to several specimens. For instance, in grave T.83 at Tell Shyiukh Tahtani a striking amount of miniaturised handmade pots were retrieved amounting to fifteen specimens (Sconzo 2006).

According to Di Pietro (2019: 53 with relevant bibliography), the selection of miniatures as grave goods in infant burial in Egypt could suggest their use as toys. Similar considerations have been put forward in quite distant chronological and geographical contexts, such as in the Maya postclassical site of Mayapán (Kohut 2011). Unfortunately, there is no corroborative textual or visual evidence to interpret these objects as playthings in ANE contexts. Moreover, miniature vessels occur also in adult burials throughout the ANE in different periods. Thus, while a toy function cannot be disregarded, other uses are also supported by the finding context.

4. Conclusion

«Fundamental to the recognition of (child-structured) toys in archaeological records is the need to realise that a 'toy' is not a single-function object, unified and static within a defined 'toy' category» (Crawford 2009: 61). This is inferred, for instance, by the fact that different interpretations appear plausible for the categories of objects discussed throughout the article, pointing to their possible multifunctional use. The analysis of a selected sample of children's graves allowed us to speculate on particular grave goods that can be interpreted as playthings which occur in connection with children. In particular, noise-making objects, such as rattles, whistles, and castanets, mainly recur in association with children's graves or in adult's burials when child remains are also present.

21 The study of fingerprints on vessels is being carried out within the Hama J project (see fn. 13). I would like to warmly thank Stephen Lumsden, Akiva Sanders, and Georges Mouamar for providing me with this information that will appear in a forthcoming article.

When documented, age categories associated with these findings encompass infants and children about 2-4 years old. The presence of these grave goods in the burials of the prematurely deceased reflects the adults' behaviours in selecting objects that can be also widely found in domestic contexts, thus suggesting that they were used throughout all levels of society. Similarly, handmade miniature vessels can also occur in child burials as miniaturised versions of full-size exemplars. However, the presence of these objects in differentiated contexts (such as temples or cultic areas), as well as the mention of musical or noise-maker instruments in later Hittite ritual texts, similarly points to a multifunctional use. Besides visible objects, the presence of invisible toys made of perishable materials should be kept in mind as well, as contemporary, and later Egyptian burial assemblages illustrate. These objects are revealed among others in the rare mentions of children games mentioned in cuneiform texts referring to playthings such as balls, sticks and ropes. Although playtime appears as an elusive component of Ancient Near Eastern societies based on textual and archaeological sources, nevertheless it must have been a fundamental aspect of children's cognitive and physical development that still needs to be explored through different lines of enquiry and multidisciplinary approaches that have only recently emerged in childhood studies in the past.

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