May a Spinning Top become a Chest? New Insights into the Cultural Meaning of Spinning Tops in Early Iron Age Athens

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Abstract
The pointed *pyxis* is one of the most elegant and colorful Athenian Geometric vases. This shape is fairly rare, as it is well attested only between EG I and MG II. Interestingly, it has been found almost exclusively in exceptionally wealthy burials containing a large amount of pottery, exotic and prestige goods, metal tools, and jewellery. These funerary assemblages clearly demonstrate the deceased's claim to *élite status*.
It is then likely that the pointed *pyxis* may have played a particular role in Athenian funerary rites. Nevertheless, the origin and meaning of the shape are still difficult to define. Being sometimes labelled as an egg-shaped vase, the bulbous object might resemble the shape of Geometric spinning tops, as suggested by a few scholars (Dontas, Kent Hill) whose words, however, went unheeded. This paper highlights the suggestive connection among pointed *pyxides*, spinning tops, girls/young women, Eros, and the love sphere. My main goal is to assess whether it is possible to recognize in the pointed *pyxis* a *simulacrum* of the spinning top, i.e. a metaphorical reference to the complex and multifaceted semantic status of the toy, which alludes to the unpredictable duration of life, and perhaps even to divinatory practices (*e.g.* drawing lots for a good wedding during prenuptial ceremonies).

1. Introducing Spinning Top in Geometric Athens[1]

The spinning top was a common toy in ancient Greece. Spinning tops could be made of various materials, including bronze, stone, glass, and lead, but wood

1 This paper represents one of the main outcomes of the fruitful collaboration between the LALLACT Project, based at the University of Milan "La Statale" and supervised by this Author (see *supra, Great Team at Play*, by C. Lambrugo, C. Torre), and the ERC project 2017-2022/2023 "Locus Ludi: The Cultural Fabric of Play and Games in Classical Antiquity", directed by Véronique Dasen (Université de Fribourg, Switzerland). The theory put forth in this paper was first proposed within the webinar series organized by Véronique Dasen and her team during the first uncertain months of the Covid 19 pandemic. While the virus was

and terracotta seem to have been the most common. Spinning tops could also have different shapes, but two types are more commonly observed. One is the twirler, equivalent of the French *toupie* and Italian *trottola,* which is usually shaped like a cone or a disc, and may have a stem on top for spinning the toy, either by hand or through a string wrapped around the toy (fig. 1a-b). The second one is the whipping top, equivalent of the French *sabot* and Italian *paleo*, with a cylindrical body ending in a short, conical tip, often with grooves on the sides (fig. 1c-d). To spin this latter top, one has to strike it with a whip (*mastix* figs 12-13), which is also used to keep the toy in motion (Salza Prina Ricotti 1995: 32-35; de' Siena 2009: 75-78; Lambrugo 2013a; Cruccas 2014; Dasen 2019; Giuman 2020; Klinger 2021: 100-105; Lambrugo 2021; Sabetai 2022: 154-158; see also Kyriakou-Zapheiropoulou 2014-2015: 383-384, for conical clay objects which are likely to be recognized as twirlers)[2].

To this variety of shapes corresponds an equally remarkable variety of ancient Greek names for spinning top. Greek tops are mentioned in literary sources with different names such as στρόμβος, στρόβιλος, βέμβηξ, βέμβιξ[3], and each name apparently relates to a different semantic sphere with interesting changes over time (Torre 2019). Στρόμβος and στρόβιλος are the earliest terms used, and both of them are connected to the sense of a quick movement and referred to an object which turns quickly around its own axis[4]. However, by the end of the Classical Period, the term στρόβιλος lost its dynamic component and was used to indicate conical objects, such as pine cones (Amigues 1978). In other words, the cone shape of the toy resulted in changing the meaning of the word.

Greek Geometric tops (dating from the 9th and 8th century BC), either with or without the stem on top for spinning the toy, are generally the interpretation given to certain conical items. Some of them are worth mentioning here: the piece (h 11,43 cm) from the British Museum (Lambrugo 2013a: 31; fig. 2a), whose exact provenance and chronology are unknown; and the top from Grave 3 on the south slope of the Akropolis at Athens. The latter (h 12,7 cm), dating from the early 8th century BC (Middle Geometric II), was published by Dontas as a spinning top, and as such is now on display in the Akropolis Museum (Dontas 1961-1962: 86, 90-91, pl. 34; Giuman 2020: 25; fig. 2b).

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spreading all over the world, deeply changing our life and impacting on research, the webinars were a great opportunity to meet and exchange scientific ideas. My warmest thanks to Véronique Dasen, Anna Maria D'Onofrio, Susan Langdon for their suggestions.

2 For further examples of spinning tops see *infra*, chapter by V. Sabetai.

3 The Greek names ῥόμβος, τροχός, and κῶνος, this latter clearly alluding to the pine cone shape, are worthy of a deeper discussion: see *infra*, chapter by C. Torre.

4 See *infra*, chapter by A. Scala for a study of the semantic motivations of the names labelling "spinning tops", which reveal interesting processes of categorization.

Fig. 1a. Bone spinning top (Italian *trottola*); h 2 cm; diam. 2,3 cm; from Eretria (Greece); 330-270 BC. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines (© 2009 RMN-Grand Palais; musée du Louvre / Hervé Lewandowski).

Fig. 1b. Wooden spinning top (Italian *trottola*); h 8,5 cm; from Tebtynis (Egypt); 1st-3rd century AD. Milano, Civico Museo Archeologico, inv. n. E 0.9.40021 (© Milano, Civico Museo Archeologico).

Fig. 1c. Clay whipping top (Italian *paleo*); from Thebes (Greece), *Kabirion* sanctuary; 5th century BC. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines, CA 447 (© 2019 RMN-Grand Palais; musée du Louvre / Tony Querrec)

Fig. 1d. Clay whipping top (Italian *paleo*); h 6,6 cm; diam 4,9 cm; from Thebes (Greece), *Kabirion* sanctuary; 5th century BC. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines, CA 446 (© 2009 RMN-Grand Palais; musée du Louvre / Hervé Lewandowski).

Fig. 2a. Clay spinning top (h 11,43 cm); Geometric Period (8th century BC). (©London, British Museum inv. n. 1875,0309.31)

Fig. 2b. Clay spinning top (h 12,7 cm) from Grave 3, south slope of the Akropolis, Athens; Middle Geometric II (early 8th century BC). Athens, Akropolis Museum, NA 1961, NAK 300 (©Acropolis Museum 2018, photo: Yiannis Koulelis).

Additionally, it is useful to draw attention to three other artefacts belonging to the so-called "*Berlin-München Fundgruppe aus Attika*" (fig. 3 in red circles**)**, whose features and sizes (h 9,5/7,5/7 cm) definitively resemble the shape of the aforementioned spinning tops (*CVA Deutschland 9*, *München 3*: pl. 129, 3-5). The "*Berlin-München Fundgruppe*" (*CVA Deutschland 9*, *München 3*: pls. 125, 129; *CVA Deutschland 85*, *Berlin 10*: pls. 3-6), unanimously dated to the middle of the 9th century BC (transition from Early Geometric II to Middle Geometric I), is an acquisition from the antiquarian market from the beginning of the last century, later split between Munich and Berlin, and thought to be very likely coming from an Athenian child's grave (Smithson 1974: 373). Notwithstanding the total lack of evidence, the bowl with one handle in the shape of a booted leg is generally assumed to mark sub-adult tombs in Geometric Athens, and to have been specifically associated with male individuals (D'Onofrio 2017: 45; Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: 848). But what is particularly relevant for the topic at hand is the close similarity within the "*Berlin-München Fundgruppe*" between the so-called Geometric pointed *pyxides* and the cone-shaped tops. The latter objects are sometimes not interpreted as such, but rather are labelled "pseudo-*pyxides*", as they are closed and full terracotta objects.

Having been inspired by an authoritative suggestion in Giuman's book (Giuman 2020: 25, note 2), I would like to propose a competing argument that suggests that the pointed *pyxis*, whose precise derivation is still unclear, may purposefully resemble a spinning top. I will also discuss the possible cultural significance of this suggestion. The hypothesis that the shape of the pointed *pyxis* may have been derived from the common spinning top was actually mentioned *en passant* by Dorothy Kent Hill while describing a similar *pyxis* in Baltimore, but the idea went unheeded (Kent Hill 1956: 37).

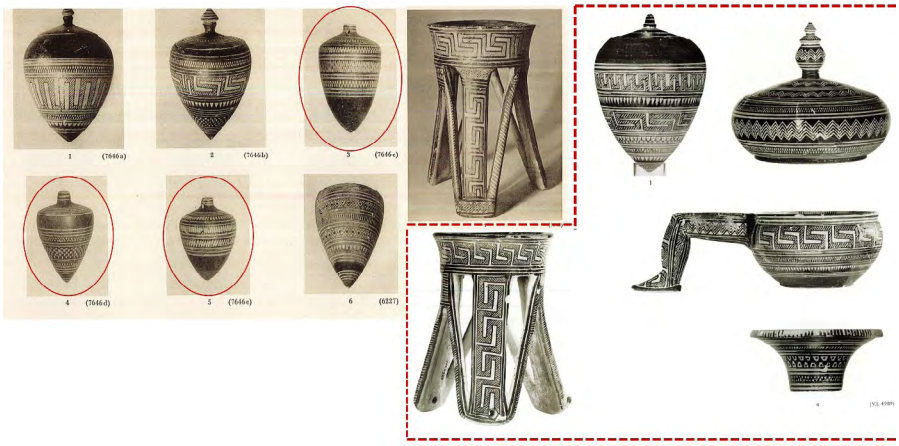

Fig. 3. The so-called "*Berlin-München Fundgruppe aus Attika*": in the dashed line on right the artefacts preserved in Berlin; on left the ones in Munich; in red circles the spinning tops (or "pseudo *pyxides*"); middle 9th century BC (Author's elaboration from *CVA Deutschland 9*, *München 3* & *CVA Deutschland 85*, *Berlin 10*).

2. The Athenian Geometric Pointed *Pyxis*

The so-called pointed *pyxis* (fig. 4), one of the most elegant and colorful Athenian Geometric vases, is characterized by an ovoid profile, cut at the top (i.e. the greatest diameter is on the upper part of the vessel), and tapering toward a rounded or more pointed bottom. It is a wheel-made and painted ware whose development, already well mapped by Coldstream (1968: 11, 17, 23) and Bohen (1979; 1988: 24-27), has been more recently revised by Papadopoulos and Smithson (2017: 780-783). The vase, whose height ranges from 13 cm to 17 cm, appears in the Early Geometric I (EG I: 900-875 BC) as a new creation without real precedents in the Protogeometric Period[5] and enjoys its great popularity between a later phase of the Early Geometric (EG II: 875-850 BC) and the Middle Geometric I (MG I: 850-800 BC). The shape slowly disappears before the end of the Middle Geometric II (MG II: 800-760 BC). The whole surface of the pot is usually covered with a considerable variety of geometric patterns: zigzags, hatched meanders, lozenge chains, chevrons etc., accurately organized in multiple registers ranging from four to eight.

The origin of the shape is unclear and still poses a challenging problem. Sometimes labelled as an egg-shaped vase (Iliffe 1931; Young 1949: 285), the vessel has a profile too pointed at the bottom to be considered a clay version of eggs like certain later Athenian black-figure vases, sometimes pierced both on the top and the bottom. In addition, the pointed *pyxis* was meant for suspension: the holes piercing its lid rim and lip were undoubtedly created for a string. These vertically pierced holes are usually four, divided into two opposing pairs on either side of the rim.

Furthermore, as they were made not to stand up, but to be hung, Athenian Geometric pointed *pyxides* are likely to be distinguished from those clay domed objects (fig. 5), generally interpreted as miniature models of granaries (Morris, Papadopoulos 2004: 226-229; Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: 849-862) or of vertical hives (Cherici 1989; Negro, forthcoming)[6]. In fact, despite being vaguely reminiscent of the same pointed shape, the latter artefacts have their own precise features, namely an opening on the top protected by a shutter or horizontal flap and holes at the base, as if they were meant to be filled from the top and emptied from the bottom.

5 The only exception is perhaps the Attic Fine Handmade Incised pointed *pyxis* which is however mostly contemporary and relatively rare outside the exceptional "Tomb of the Rich Athenian Lady": Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: 780, 869-871. Moreover, it is worth underlining that the majority of the Attic Fine Handmade Incised pointed *pyxides* have ovoid bodies with their greatest diameter closer to the middle of the *pyxis*, whereas the wheelmade and painted pointed ones have it on the upper part of the vessel.

6 These bulbous objects have brought up a long-term debate which refers to them also as to kilns, bread-ovens, or rattles, whistles, and even piggy-banks.

More variations of the pointed *pyxis* are also known in the pottery productions of Corinth, Boeotia, and Crete[7], but I agree with most scholars (Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: 781) that these versions are far removed from the Athenian pointed *pyxides*, and rather seem to be miniaturizations of large storage vessels.

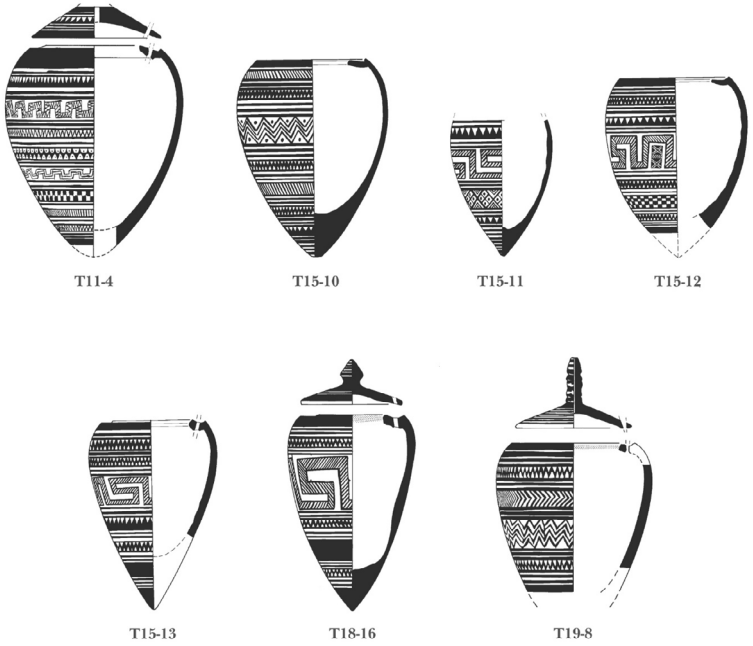

Fig. 4. Geometric pointed *pyxides* from the Early Iron Age cemeteries at the Athenian Agora (redrawn after Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: fig. 6.27; scale 1:3).

Fig. 5. Model "granaries" and chest from the "Tomb of the Rich Athenian Lady" (redrawn after Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: fig. 6.44).

7 Bohen 1988: 25, note 161; 27, note 174. For the shape in Corinthian ware, with a surprisingly long interval between the Geometric specimens and the Corinthian ones, see Williams 1970: 18, pls. 8-9, n. 24 (Protogeometric); Payne 1931: 323, note 1 («ovoid pyxis»); Amyx 1988: 453-454; Lambrugo 2013b: 94 (Corinthian). For the shape in the Cretan pottery see Levi 1945: 25, pl. 19:2; Brock 1957: 129, pl. 108.

3. The Athenian Geometric Pointed *Pyxis* in Context

Athenian Geometric pointed *pyxides*, apparently a bizarre and rare shape, have mostly been found in famous grave groups brought to light between the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century in Athens, on the slopes of the Akropolis and in the area between the Areopagus and the Athenian Agora respectively (an accurate list in Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: 780-783). It is worth pointing out that all the graves stand out as exceptionally wealthy burials, containing a large amount of pottery, exotic and prestige goods, metal tools, and jewellery—sometimes even gold—clearly demonstrating the dead's claims to *élite status*.

The earliest and far richest contexts for these vessels belong to the so-called "Areiopagos Plot", a group of burials scattered midway along the north slope of the Areiopagos, ranging chronologically from the Sub Mycenaean Period to the beginning of the Early Geometric. The tombs might be linked with an aristocratic Attic clan (a royal *genos*?) with a long history and large responsibilities in economic affairs (D'Onofrio 2001; Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: 35-272)[8].

A crucial cornerstone of the Aegean Early Iron Age chronology, and thus of the beginning of the Geometric Period in Athens, is Tomb 11, also known as the "Boots Grave", fully published by Rodney Young (Young 1949; more recently Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: 77-102). It is an urn cremation of the trench-and-hole type, dating from ca. 900 BC (Early Geometric I). The lavish grave assemblage uncovered in the pyre debris consists of the famous two pairs of clay boots, a large amount of *oinochoai* of various shapes and sizes, *skyphoi*, *kantharoi*, and a pointed *pyxis* (h 19,5 cm), together with some bronze jewellery, especially dress pins and fibulae which had no doubt served to fasten the clothes of the deceased (fig. 6a-b). As for the cremated remains, Liston's recent analysis concludes that they belong to a female individual aged 20-25 at death.

Unsurprisingly, several fragmentary pointed *pyxides* were recovered from the pyre debris of the largely celebrated "Tomb of the Rich Athenian Lady" (fig. 7), and numerous sherds also came from the dump by the so-called "Geometric House" nearby, probably a ruler's dwelling converted in a cult place for performing heroic rituals (D'Onofrio 2001 with previous bibliography, but see also Laughy 2018 for the tomb cult theory revisited). The tomb of the "Rich Lady" (Tomb 15, Deposit H 16:6; Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: 124-176; see also Smithson 1968) is a cremation of the trench-and-hole type dated to ca. 850 BC (i.e. near the end of Early Geometric II). The enormous number of grave

8 We do not enter here into the heated debate about the original destination of the Kerameikos area (site of the future Agora): with many inhabited nuclei and different tomb clusters, according to the model of multi-focal sites? or with the entire community of Athenians settled on the Acropolis and in the southern districts of the city and the Kerameikos area attended merely as a vast burial ground? An overview in D'Onofrio 2021; Papadopoulos 2021.

Pots from Grave
R. S. Young: An Early Geometric Grave

Fig. 6a. Athens, north slope of the Areiopagos, the "Boots Grave" with its grave assemblage; Early Geometric I (Young 1949: pl. 67).

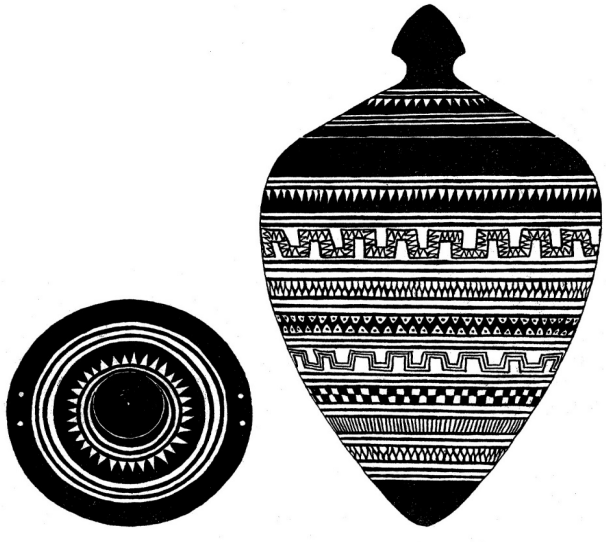

Fig. 6b. Pointed *pyxis* from the "Boots Grave" (Young 1949: fig. 4).

offerings – among which it is worth mentioning the famous clay chest with five model "granaries" (Morris, Papadopoulos 2004; fig. 5) –, as well as their quality and the profusion of exotic artefacts such as gold, glass, faience, and ivory, are to be interpreted in terms of the wealth of the cremated Athenian woman, an aristocratic lady, perhaps even an archon's wife. Interestingly, the same grave yielded the largest number of pointed *pyxides*. The cremated remains of this rich woman underwent a recent reexamination by Liston and Papadopoulos (2004), who brought to light the presence of a fetus four-to-eight weeks short of full term, and established that the adult female (reported to be 30-35 years old at death) died during pregnancy or premature childbirth.

Fig. 7. Pointed *pyxides* from the "Tomb of the Rich Athenian Lady"; Early Geometric II (Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: fig. 2.80).

Tomb 18 (Deposit I 18:1, Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: 185-199; previously published in Bradford Welles 1947: 271, pl. 64; Smithson 1974: 330-331, 352-359, pls. 75-77), still «one of the richest burials of the period» (Smithson 1974: 331), lies in the same burial ground. It is a Middle Geometric I inhumation in a rectangular trench, partly cut in the bedrock, belonging to a child aged 12-14 years at death. Unfortunately, the fragmented state of the skeleton makes it difficult to determine the sex of the individual. Eighteen well-preserved vessels (fig. 8a), among which is a pointed *pyxis* (h 16,5 cm, fig. 8b), laid on and around the legs of the deceased, together with a pierced stone plaque and two fragmentary iron shafts (or iron pieces).

Another pointed *pyxis* (h 18,6 cm) in a rich assemblage of flat *pyxides* comes from a Middle Geometric I simple trench cremation (Tomb 19, Deposit I 18:2, Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: 199-204; Smithson 1974: 359-362) excavated not far from the aforementioned Tomb 18. The cremated human bones from this tomb were not preserved, but a fragmented cooking pot led Smithson to suggest that the deceased may have been a woman.

Pointed *pyxides* are well represented in the Kerameikos too (Bohen 1988: 24-27, fig. 9a), although a single example (h 14 cm), from the second half of the 9th century BC (Middle Geometric I), is reported to have been uncovered in a tomb, Grave 13 (Kübler 1954: 218-220, pl. 110; fig. 9b), whose human remains were attributed to a male adolescent (Kübler 1954: 26).

Fig. 8a. Athens, north slope of the Areiopagos, grave goods from Tomb 18, child inhumation; Middle Geometric I (Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: fig. 2.109).

Fig. 8b. Pointed *pyxis* from Tomb 18 (inventory number P 17475). Athens, Museum of the Ancient Agora (Ephorate of Antiquities of Athens City, Ancient Agora, ASCSA: Agora Excavations © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development - H.O.C.RE.D.)

Also worth mentioning are some tombs and related grave goods uncovered by the German Archaeological Institute at Athens during regular excavations, carried out between 1892 and 1899 under the general supervision of Wilhelm Dörpfeld, in the broad open areas of the Akropolis slopes, the Areiopagos, and the eastern-most slopes of the Pnyx (Papadopulos, Smithson 2017: 37-40). Smithson then undertook the remarkable work of piecing together the Dörpfeld's graves and materials, which resulted in a crucial publication (Smithson 1974). We are thus informed about the presence of two pointed *pyxides* in the West Slope Graves I and II (W.Sl. I & II, December 1895), both of them recorded as child's inhumations (Smithson 1974: 373-374), but without relying on a proper osteological study of the human remains. Besides, an exceptionally fine pointed *pyxis* (h 16 cm), suggesting a very early Middle Geometric I or the transition between Early Geometric II and Middle Geometric I, comes from Tomb II in the Phinopoulos Lot (3, Hadrian Street), north of the *Hephaisteion*. This grave is considered to be a female cremation in simple trench, but this identification is exclusively based on the presence of a spindle whorl. The pointed *pyxis* is one of the objects that by 1902/1903 became part of the collection of the National Museum in Athens (NM 15317; Smithson 1974: 374, 379-382; *CVA Grèce 1, Athènes 1*, pl. 1, 8).

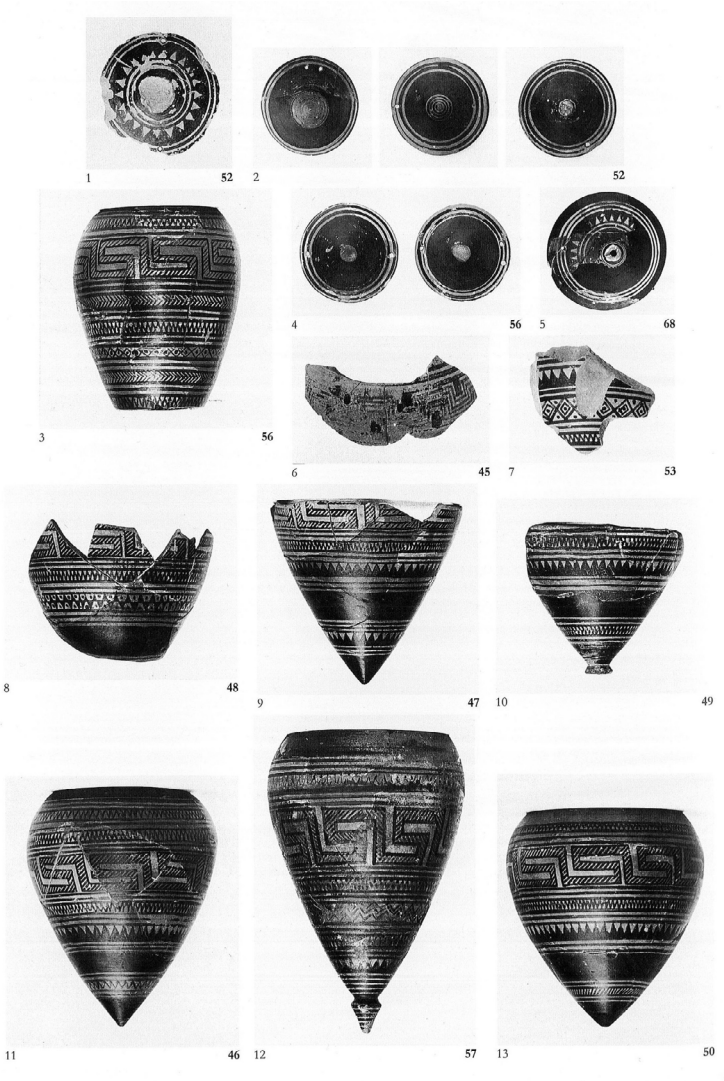

Fig. 9a. Pointed *pyxides* from the Kerameikos (BOHEN 1988: pl. 4).

One of the latest archaeological contexts containing pointed *pyxides* appears to be the aforementioned Grave 3 from the south slope of Akropolis (Dontas 1961-1962: 86, 90-91). Dating from the early 8th century BC (Middle Geometric II), the grave has a rich ceramic assemblage that includes two pointed *pyxides* and a spinning top (figs 2b, 10).

Fig. 9b. Pointed *pyxis* from Kerameikos, Grave 13 (Kübler 1954: pl. 110).

It is also worth mentioning four more Athenian funerary contexts containing pointed *pyxides*, sometimes more than one per assemblage, all dating from between Early Geometric and Middle Geometric. One is the grave of a young woman discovered in Odos Haghiou Dimitriou 20, in the eastern portion of the Kerameikos. The grave goods consisted of three pointed *pyxides* (doubtfully referred to the spinning top shape by the excavator), two pairs of model boots, and two dolls (Ph. Stavropoulos, in «Archaiologikòn Deltion» 19, 1964, B1: 54-55, 49-50). Another *pyxis* was uncovered in the grave of a young woman on the southern slope of the Acropolis, at the crossroad between Odos Mitseon e Odos Zitrou (A. Andriomenoi, in «Archaiologikòn Deltion» 21, 1966, B1: 84-85). Both of these burials are dating from EG I, while tomb *alpha* from Eleusis, also containing a young woman, is dating from MG I (A. Skias, in «Archaiologikè Ephemeris» 1898, 103-104, pl. 4.4. A. Skias, in «Archaiologikè Ephemeris» 1912, 36, pl. 16).

Lastly, the extraordinary "Toronto Grave Group" (fig. 11), published as a «Geometric tomb group from Athens», contained an astonishing number of pointed *pyxides* (six, h 8-17 cm), two *kalathoi*, a glass bead, a clay spindle whorl,

two bronze pins, and a large "sail" bronze bow fibula, which may indicate a female grave, although we cannot rely on skeletal remains (Iliffe 1931)[9].

Fig. 10. Athens, south slope of the Akropolis, grave goods from Tomb 3; early 8th century BC; Middle Geometric II. Athens, Akropolis Museum, NA 1961, NAK 1980@ /199@ /200@ /297@ /298@ /299@ /300@ /301@ (©Acropolis Museum 2011, 2018, photo: Yiannis Koulelis, Vangelis Tsiamis).

9 Several high-quality pointed *pyxides* are also preserved in world-famous museum collections. Lacking precise contextual details, some of these latter are briefly listed here, but not discussed in the text: *CVA Deutschland 15*, *Mainz 1*, pl. 4, 4-5; *CVA France 25*, *Louvre 16*, pl. 1, 3-4; *CVA Great Britain 12, Reading 1*, pl. 8, 1.

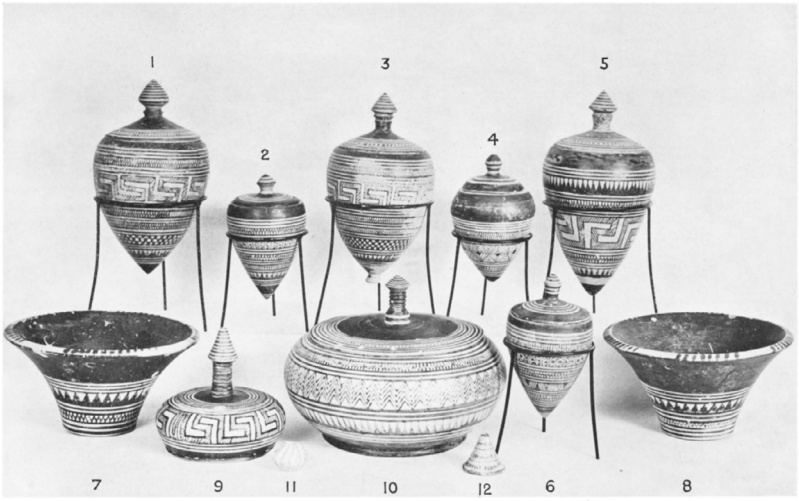

Fig. 11. "Toronto Grave Group" (Iliffe 1931:pl. VI).

4. Towards an Interpretation

To sum up the available data, the Athenian Geometric pointed *pyxis* is a comparatively rare form that does not seem to have been in vogue for very long, as it is well attested in lavish funerary assemblages only between Early Geometric I and Middle Geometric II. The *pyxis* must have had some special use, but there are no traces of what, if anything, the *pyxides* contained, nor any burnt remains have ever been discovered inside the vessels. Equally significant is the specific association with members of the aristocracy, which may hint at the pointed *pyxis* having a particular significance in Athenian funerary rites.

Not all the listed tombs with pointed *pyxides* are accompanied by published analyses of the human remains, and we know how slippery it is to rely only on the vagaries of the assemblages and on what grave goods might be deemed – at any given time – gender-specific. But when the study of human remains is available, pointed *pyxides* are mostly reported to belong to female graves of either sub-adult or adult individuals (Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: 506-508, table 3.2). While discussing what she refers to as the "maiden kit", which consists of dolls made of Attic Fine Handmade Incised Ware, terracotta models of boots and chests, *kalathoi*, and spiral hair ornaments, Langdon (2008: 130-143) suggests that pointed *pyxides* might be «maiden-linked» as well (Langdon 2008: 130). But she does not explore this hypothesis any further.

The current scholarship agrees that in Early Iron Age Athens the graves of girls and women, at least between the Early Geometric and the Middle Geometric phase, are the richest in terms of quantity and range of objects.

Besides, they tend to be marked by the deposition of a host of gender-specific grave goods symbolically alluding to the nuptial sphere, as being a virtuous bride and a good and prolific mother were the ultimate and only purpose of women's lives. Focusing on marriage in elite burial groups evokes double loss, not only of the *parthenos*/young bride/young mother herself but also of her potential to produce offspring. We know well that this marked visibility conferred after death to an elite group of women, even if partly due to emotional factors, can mainly be interpreted as a compensatory reaction to the significant social investment placed by the household on the offspring, as a way to assert elite roles within a society in formation.

The model chest, for example, a finely decorated rectangular box with a lid, might refer to wool-working, jewelry, and other items in a bride's *pherné*, symbolizing the feminine goods and talents that marriage brought to a new household (Langdon 2008: 138-139). Moreover, clay boots, which sometimes occur in the same assemblages as the pointed *pyxides* (fig. 6a), are now definitively established as the *akrosphyra* (girls' boots) of the literary sources, and thus as specific markers of young women who (we assume) did not live long enough to be married, but received symbolic equipment to mark their status, unmistakably evoking the sense of passage either in bridal or in funerary rites (Cultraro, Torelli 2009: 175-184; Torelli, Cultraro 2010: 20-27; Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: 844-848).

It is also noteworthy that an important shift occurs in the women's burial kit around the middle of the 8th century BC, which means between Middle Geometric II and Late Geometric, exactly when the pointed *pyxis* disappears from the grave goods, as such suggesting its belonging to a precise social system of female representation in the funerary realm. Langdon (2008: 141-143) argues that the change in burial goods ca. 750 BC coincides with the rise of figurative scenes, especially in painted pottery. This is a fascinating hypothesis that would deserve a more in-depth analysis. If true, this would mean that with the appearance of figurative scenes the system of values through which the Athenian community establishes the social identity of young girls of marrying age or young brides was transferred from terracotta objects to scenes painted on vessels. It is indeed peculiar that there is a chronological correspondence between the disappearance of pointed *pyxides* in grave goods and the first representations, on LG jugs made exclusively for funerary contexts, of scenes in which certain characters hold objects that look very similar to the *pyxides* analyzed in this work. These vases belong to the so-called "Rattle Group", decorated with painted scenes showing seated figures holding spindle-like objects. The latter have been so far interpreted either as purifying sprinklers shaped like pomegranates or as percussion instruments to scare off evil spirits from the grave. As far as I know, no one has ever pointed out the strong similarity between pointed

pyxides and the eponymous spindle-like objects of the Rattle Group (*CVA Great Britain 25*, *British Museum 11*, n. 40, pls. 26, 27).

To which symbolic horizon may the pointed *pyxides* be referring? First, they were used in Athens at least until the mid-8th century BC, and they seem to have been firmly embedded in a coherent funerary system pertaining to female individuals. On the one hand, it is possible that these vessels contained jewels or other precious objects belonging to the deceased (*e.g.* exotic ointments or perfumed powders) that signalled elite status, and as such, they may have been displayed during elaborate funerary ceremonies. On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the close resemblance between the shape of the vessels and that of the contemporary spinning tops. On the contrary, the fact that certain funerary assemblages (such as Grave 3 on the south slope of the Akropolis and the so-called "*Berlin-München Fundgruppe*", discussed above) include both true and "false" pointed *pyxides* (the latter perhaps being spinning tops), may suggest that the shape of the refined pointed box was created in Athens as a symbolic reference to the spinning top during a period in which craftsmen were boldly experimenting with new pottery shapes between EG and MG.

However, this reference should not be regarded as pointing to the spinning top as a mere plaything, since it is very plausible that the functional toy used in everyday life was smaller and made of wood rather than terracotta (fig. 1b). The pointed *pyxis*, by resembling the shape of the spinning top, should rather have acted as a *simulacrum* of it, a symbolic reference to the complex and multifaceted semantic status of the toy.

Playing with spinning tops was not always easy. On the contrary, it was an activity that required great ability in putting and keeping the toy in motion. Therefore, a special relationship was established by the Greeks between adolescents and tops, which were not suitable for small children. Véronique Dasen (2016), Marco Giuman (2020: 16-23), and other scholars have emphasized how frequently tops (particularly the ones that need to be struck with a whip) occur in ephebic contexts, sometimes in friendly cooperation with Hermes, the kinetic god *par excellence*, effectively embodying youthful excitement and dangerous uncontrolled *vertigo*, or lack of self-control. This significant relationship between spinning tops and adolescence, which seems to be particularly strong during the 5th and the 4th century BC, at least judging from Greek vase paintings, might also explain why we find tops as votive offerings in sanctuaries, dedicated to various gods protecting youth on the occasion of coming of age[10].

Most importantly, in ancient literature tops have a very long tradition of serving as a metaphor for a heterodirect psychological condition linked to feelings such as hatred, happiness, but particularly love and passion, whose devastating

10 For spinning tops and rites of passage in Greek and Roman sanctuaries see also *infra*, chapters by V. Sabetai, A Lojacono, L. Dal Monte and G. Colzani.

power makes human beings rotate without being able to resist. In this regard, it is also worth mentioning the special connection of spinning tops with girls or young women, Eros, and the love sphere, as often seen on Greek vase paintings from the Classical period (figs 12-13)[11]. Scholars agree in possibly recognizing in these latter scenes references to divinatory practices comparable to drawing lots for a good wedding within the context of prenuptial ceremonies (*proteleia*): «*le jeu dévoile l'avenir amoureux. Aux mouvements aléatoires de la toupie s'ajoute le* klêdôn*, une parole spontanée qui constitue un message divin. Le présage concerne le choix d'un mariage* (Dasen 2016: 78)». In other words, young brides are supposed to be 'playing' with spinning tops to receive a divine message, an *omen* related to the crucial choice of a good marriage (Dasen 2016: 82-85; Scapini 2016; Dasen 2017; Giuman 2020: 16-48). Interestingly, when the archaeological context is known, Greek red-figure vases with painted scenes representing young women spinning tops are strongly associated with *aoroi*'s tombs (Giuman 2020: 28-41).

In a broader, and even more meaningful perspective, the toy, a turning object whose rotations are unpredictable, might have represented «*la part de l'aléatoire dans la vie, en comparant la durée imprévisible du movement de la toupie à celle de l'existence* (Dasen 2016: 78)»: a turning object for underlining a turning point of life - from childhood to adulthood, from unmarried to married status, even from life to death - and the related unpredictable paths.

Can we then theorize that the symbolic meaning of spinning tops, widely spread in 5th and 4th century BC Greece and subsequently transmitted, with few variations, to the Roman world, already existed in Early Iron Age Athens? As Langdon clearly states (2008: 124), «one of the challenges in studying the process of socialization in ancient Greece is maintaining historical focus and resisting the anachronistic application of later rituals and texts to earlier periods. Religious and social institutions maintained a certain amount, perhaps a great deal, of continuity from the later 8th century into Archaic and Classical times. Moral and social orders base their authority on tradition. Nevertheless, it is the dynamic use of tradition, of ancestral myths and cultural symbols in communal rituals, that makes possible the state's replication in changing historical circumstances».

From this perspective, I am rather convinced that it is plausible to establish a symbolic connection between Geometric spinning tops and these extraordinary terracotta containers. Pointed *pyxides* could have hardly been used in daily life, but they would have been suitable as display objects in lavish funerary ceremonies of Geometric élite individuals as a *memento* of the unpredictable duration of life, and a marker of an *omen* for a good marriage that never came or was dramatically interrupted by premature death.

11 See *infra*, chapters by A. Lojacono, V. Dasen and C. Torre.

Fig. 12. Attic red figure *lekythos*; maidens 'playing' with spinning tops; Bosanquet Painter; 475-425 BC. Boston, J. Herrmann collection (Oakley 1997: fig. 9D).

Fig. 13: Attic red figure squat *lekythos*; women 'playing' with spinning tops; 440-430 BC. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (Neils, Oakley 2003: 270).

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