

Toys and Games: Reflections and New Perspectives

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1. What is a Plaything?

Research on play and games in antiquity has reached a turning point, exemplified by this diachronic collective volume. New theoretical models that integrate the specificities of ancient ludic culture invite us to reflect on the relationship of the Ancients with the objects that we categorize as ‘toys’ in the modern world.¹ While Greek and Latin vocabulary have many terms referring to play as an activity, in Greek *παίζω*, ‘play’, related to *παῖς*, ‘child’ (Casevitz 2018), in Latin *ludus*, play in action, and *iocus*, verbal play, no Greek or Latin word designates a plaything in a generic way. In Greek *ἄθλημα* and *παίγνιον*, in Latin *ludicrum*, do not describe a specific form or materiality. Philological and linguistic studies highlight that the field of this vocabulary is polysemic: it includes broadly items that fascinate, provide pleasure and emotion, from the shell to the jewel, including the *παίγνιον* which can be made out of nothing (Dieu 2022; Patera 2022). No hyperonym corresponds to our current ‘toy’, an object designed and mass-produced by adults for children. Similar observations can be made about other ancient cultures.²

This gap between ancient and contemporary concepts is telling. In antiquity, as in North-African and Saharan societies explored by Jean-Pierre Rossie (2022a, 2022b and in this volume), a plaything is defined primarily by its use, not

1 On the French word, see Dieu 2022 (first occurrence in the 13th century, toy end of 16th century). This research is part of the ERC project Locus Ludi funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement # 741520). <https://locusludi.hypotheses.org/>

2 On Egypt and Mesopotamia, see Rendu-Loisel 2020, 2022, and Vacca in this volume.

by its material or by shape, whether it is made by a child or an adult (Thibault 2022). But how can objects be identified as playful? And how can we reconstruct the associated games? The notion of play itself must be defined. It encompasses a wide range of related activities not limited to leisure or amusement, which includes education as well as social and religious performance.³ Formal resemblances with modern toys constitute other pitfalls, as for articulated anthropomorphic figurines that look like modern dolls but had different, religious, functions (Dasen, Verbanck-Piérard 2022).

Traditional identification criteria must be revisited in the light of the multi-dimensional meaning of playthings according to domestic, cultic, or funerary contexts, and to the owner's age, social group or gender, also beyond childhood.⁴ During the Old Kingdom of Egypt, several spinning-tops found in the tomb of Hemaka (ca. 3000-2900 BCE) in the Saqqara cemetery were decorated with hunting scenes which contributed to the construction of the social prestige of their adult elite owner (Piacentini/Delli Castelli in this volume).

2. A Lost Heritage?

There are various methodological issues. Spinning tops are exceptional because potential toys are difficult to identify and those that are preserved constitute a very small part of the playthings that existed. On the one hand, they were made of clay or metal, more rarely of wood, bone, ivory or amber, a misleading predominance because those in organic fibers, rag, wax, leather... (balls, rag dolls...) have disappeared.⁵ On the other hand, most identifiable objects were manufactured by adults, not by children. The material culture of children thus partly eludes us, as does the imaginary world created by their modest tools (Lambrugo 2022 and in press; Vacca in this volume).

Sally Crawford (2009) highlights the methodological difficulties faced by archaeologists. She explains how any object could be diverted from its everyday use and be transformed into a toy. Just like today, a wheel can be used as a hoop (fig. 1), terracotta discs as a stacker toy (D'Onofrio 2022; fig. 2), stone pebbles for many different games (Lambrugo 2022). In principle, the object should meet different ergonomic criteria, such as a size and weight suitable for a child's ability to handle it easily. However, such criteria are not always relevant. For example, not every small object is automatically a toy (Smith, Bergeron 2011). The function of miniatures is varied. In the Locrian necropolis, small two-wheeled bronze carts were no toys for entertainment. Found in tombs of girls, they may have referred symbolically to the

3 On play and rite, Patera 2022. For a definition, Dasen, Vespa 2021 and 2022. On the multi-dimensional function of rattles, *e.g.* Dasen 2017.

4 Crawford 2009: 61 "a 'toy' is not a single-function object, unified and static within a defined 'toy' category".

5 On toys made from plants, see Rossie 2022a.

kidnapping of Core by Hades, as depicted on the *pinakes* from the local Mannella sanctuary. These votive abduction scenes reflect the fundamental transformation produced by marriage on girls just like what happened to Persephone, wife of Hades (Redfield 2004; Costanzo 2022). Other functions are possible. In early Imperial Italy, the pieces of lead found in the tomb of the young Iulia Graphis, are in fact a miniature child *lararium* for religious training (Darani 2021).⁶

The materiality and meaning of the objects are also conditioned by their archaeological environment. When playthings come from funerary contexts, their function must be interpreted in relation to choices made by the survivors who selected objects among the deceased's personal belonging and purchased others for the occasion. The selection does not correspond to his or her preferences, but expresses the social identity that relatives wished to construct and preserve, like the Boeotian children and youths studied by Victoria Sabetai in this volume. Moreover, some objects resemble actual toys, but they were not used during the deceased person's lifetime because they are simulacra, non-functional models of the actual objects made of perishable material, such as terracotta balls imitating the leather ones (Sabetai 2022). Similar observations can be made about votive contexts, where different types of toys were non-functional simulacra, like the stone spinning tops deposited in the Boeotian Kabirion or the terracotta ones in the temple of Magna Mater in Rome (Dal Monte in this volume).



Fig. 1. Nottingham, Banksy, October 2020 (<https://banksyunofficial.com/2020/10/18/banksy-confirms-hula-hoop-girl-in-nottingham-17-october-2020/>).

6 See also the Greek Hellenistic set of miniatures, including a spinning top, from the tomb of a girl from Eretria; Hasselin Rous, Huguenot 2017.



Fig. 2. Stacker toy from Heroon Grave 11, Eretria (ca. 750-700 BCE).
The series of cut discs as a stacker toy (© Photo A.M. D’Onofrio).

3. The Spinning Top

This brief survey highlights the cultural importance of the spinning top which this volume is dedicated to. This object is special for several reasons. First, it belongs to a rare category of artefacts made intentionally for play - which does not exclude other activities - whatever the material, precious, cheap, or waste, self-made or bought in a shop (Rossie in this volume). Second, its manufacture by adults or children required a specialised know-how to produce its main characteristic, a twirling movement to defy gravity, which may seem aleatory but can be skilfully controlled with training. Third, unlike other game tools, it has a specific name, even a wide range of different names in Greek and

Latin, στρόμβος, στρόβιλος, ρόμβος, τροχός, κῶνος, βέμβηξ, βέμβιξ...⁷, a peculiarity shared by other languages, and in later periods, as Edoardo Buroni and Mario Piotti demonstrated in this volume about Lombard dialects in the 18th and 19th centuries. These words refer to rotating objects of different shapes and material, all turning around an axis, from the plain squat spinning top with a stem or spun thanks to a rope, to the teetotum, crossed by an axis, and the large spinning tops, preserved in clay, but originally made of wood, that were set into motion by a whip (μάστιξ). The animal lexical field of this object conveys a feeling of an apparent autonomy of the object which becomes a living being (bee, mosquito, fly...). The study of Andrea Scala in the volume stresses the important role played in most names by the humming sound associated with a disquieting connotation.

The undeniable function of the spinning top as an amusing toy is well evidenced by a large body of literary, iconographic, and archaeological evidence. As Agnese Lojacono stresses in this volume, spinning tops contribute to training physical skills, along with wrestling, ball games, or hoop trundling. In several vase-paintings, girls or boys play alone or in same sex pairs, but we cannot ascertain the rules of the game: they are probably competing, aiming to spin the longest or the quickest, to hustle the other spin tops or to follow a specific trajectory.⁸

However, the function of the tool is not reduced to an entertaining activity. Like other toys (the hoop, the ball, the knucklebone...), it also has a metaphorical power, which leads us to reflect on its agency. The spinning top initiates a large network of symbolic references based on the fascination created by its exceptional whirling capacity. It can describe the rotation of celestial bodies in Roman period astronomy (Torre 2019), the mystery of Christian creation (see Vaz in this volume on the powerful creative stroke of the Divine), or the ecstatic experience of frantic dances (Giuman 2020). In ancient Greece, the prevailing association is with youth and the transition between childhood and adulthood, in search for balance in the transient period of pederastic initiation for boys, love magic and prenuptial rites for girls. On a cup in Berlin, the irruption of Eros (fig. 3) between a spinning top and a hoop player showcases the disturbance created by the first homoerotic experience and the end of childish games (Fendt 2022: 180, figs 8-9). In Greek religion, gods play too, and a series of Attic and Italiote vase-paintings depict those who can master youthful emotions, Hermes, the kinetic god *par excellence*, and Eros, demonstrating the self-control one must attain (see in this volume Lambrugo figs 12, 13; Lojacono fig. 3c).

7 On this vocabulary and its chronological development, see Torre 2019 and in this volume.

8 On the differences between girls and boys at play, see also Dasen 2016 and in press.

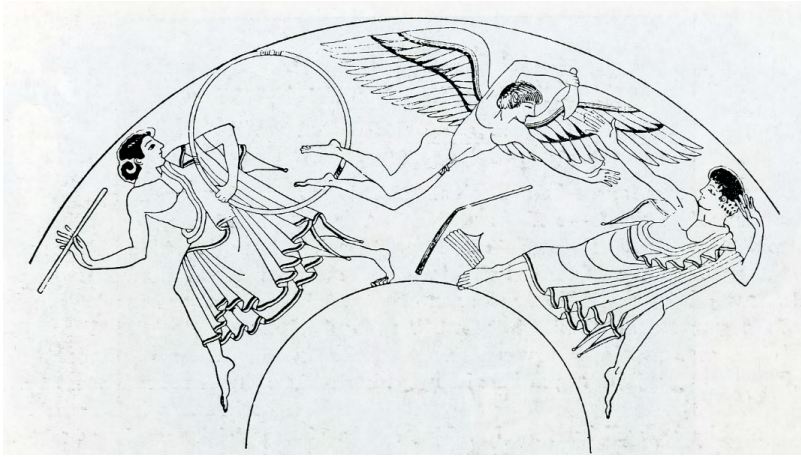


Fig. 3. Attic *kylix* (ca. 480 BCE), once in Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz F3168 (Drawing after OLSHAUSEN 1979: 18, fig. 3).

4. Twirling Nuptial Rites

Another turning point in life, marriage, is also at stake in the twirling image of the spinning top. In an epigram by Callimachus (*AP* 1.1-14), we witness an oracular consultation in the form of a cleromancy in order to choose the right wife. The consultant must observe children whipping tops to determine which woman, assimilated with a top, he should marry.

This metaphoric image of the spinning top as a bride, engaged in the nuptial process, was widespread in ancient Greece. I will mention here a few documents of different types, ranging from vase-painting to jewellery, all associated with women, that express the idea of love as a game of skill coupled with the vertigo of passion as well as the ability to control it. On the Apulian *pelike* in Matera (fig. 4; 390-380 BCE), Eros is whipping a spinning top in front of a young woman sitting, dressed as a bride, who seems to be fascinated by the action. The object is usually interpreted as referring to the votive gifts of toys during the *proaulia* rites, and hence as a symbol of the end of childhood (Giuman 2020; Lojacono in this volume). It is tempting to see in the image another connection with marriage (fig. 5; ca. 380 BCE): the rapid rotation of the spinning top could symbolize the dances of the girls who were spinning at the wedding (Dasen, Verbanck-Piérard 2022: 363, fig. 13). It could even symbolise the union itself to come, set into motion by Eros, with a precarious stability that should be constantly watched over. A similar interpretation may be suggested for an unusual detail in Hellenistic gold nuptial earrings from Kyme in Asia Minor.



Fig. 4. Apulian *pelike* (390-380 BCE)
(© Matera, Museo Nazionale “Domenico Ridola”).



Fig. 5. Attic chous (ca. 380 BCE), Tübingen, Eberhard-Karls-Universität, Archäologisches Institut 1219. (© Photo Tübingen, Eberhard-Karls-Universität, Arch. Institut).



Fig. 6. Gold earrings from a tomb in Kalymnos (end of 4th cent. BCE), Antikensammlung Misc. 10823a. b. (© Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photo Ingrid Geske).

Two similar pairs are preserved, each characterised by a set of games in action. On one pair (fig. 6; 4th cent. BCE; Schwarzmaier 2021: 77-78, fig. 1), two veiled girls are dancing and two votive dolls surround a winged Nike crouching on top, throwing knucklebones for propitiating luck, on the other pair (Schwarzmaier 2021: 77-78, fig. 2), two Erotes are twisting an *ymx*, another rotating device associated with love magic, below the votive dolls. The central part of the earring ends with a pyramidal element that could be interpreted as a symbolic spinning top, ensuring the stability of the earring as well as the marriage. More evidence supports the *longue durée* of this symbolic association. A necklace from a Hellenistic tomb in Akanthos in northern Greece (fig. 7; end of 4th -3rd c. BCE) is composed of miniature gold pendants with games: a spinning top paired with a knucklebone, another game tool associated with love and passion, a tortoise which may refer to the tortoise game *χελιχελώνη* (Pollux 9.125), and the head of Silenos, the guardian of youth and possibly a mask to play with (Wyler 2008). The other small devices allude to the protection of female health and marriage, a poppy seed,⁹ Heracles club and a knot (Dasen 2021).

The symbolism of spinning tops in the nuptial sphere may belong to a much older social system of female representation. Claudia Lambrugo also opens new avenues in this volume by interpreting the shape of Geometric ovoid pointed *pyxides* found in female elite tombs as simulacra of contemporary spinning tops.

⁹ On faience poppy seedpods as amuletic pendants, see Klinger *in press*; on their medical use due to their sedative properties, Pautasso 2015.

could confirm this hypothesis (fig. 8; ca. 425 BCE). A boy dressed in a long *himation*, with a white headband, stands before an altar, holding a round object activated by a string. Is he dedicating the toy? Is it the actual ῥόμβος or a simulacrum?¹¹ These enigmatic objects, made of two disks, often inscribed (“ὁ παῖς καλός”) and decorated with scenes relating to youth, also need to be thoroughly investigated.



Fig. 8. Attic cup (ca. 425 BCE), Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz F 2549 (© Photo J. Laurentius).

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11 On *rhombos*/*jynx* from the Kabeirion, see Sabetai 2022, pl. 4, with earlier bibliography. See in particular Shapiro 1985; Weiss, Buhl 1990.

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