


Play and childhood in ancient greece

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ABSTRACT

Andreu-Cabrera E, Cepero M, Rojas FJ, Chinchilla-Mira JJ. Play and childhood in ancient greece. *J. Hum. Sport Exerc.* Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 339-347, 2010. The traditional games of children are the maximum exponent of a people's culture of play, and though these games are sometimes derived from adult ceremonies, in spirit they belong to the world of children. Most authors assume that games depend on biological, cultural and psychological influences; they are considered a typical anthropological phenomenon in humans that is always transformed by culture. In Mediterranean countries, the climate was favourable for open-air play, which may have meant that it was possible to go without toys to have fun; the imagination developed with the natural surrounding elements, such as water, animals, flowers and shells. Play, childhood and physical education have formed an inseparable union throughout history, and Greece is no exception. Classical authors provided ample documentation on how children played, making it possible to identify analogies in play over the centuries. The *agon* as play applied from the very first instant of life and survived generation after generation. **Key words:** PLAY, TRADITION, GREECE, CHILDREN.

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INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean was the cradle of Western civilisation and the scene of many notable examples of expansion throughout history Jenkins (1998). Relations between peoples of the Mediterranean existed long before the height of the Bronze Age, though it was in this period that trade routes became established. The Phoenician and Greek civilisations developed in the Mediterranean (Andreu-Cabrera, 2009) during the first half of the first millennium BC – one of the most important cultural and political facts of ancient times.

The Mediterranean Sea has always been a meeting place for peoples separated by large geographical distances and who speak different languages. As Colet states (1993:7): *“The Mediterranean, the Mother Nostrum of the Latin, the Great Sea mentioned by the Holy Writ or the Sea of the Greeks of the Arabic version, the waters of that they join three continents, is the cradle and the crucible of the western civilization. For what it concerns to the arts, the ideas or the thought, the Greeks, who, across them his colonies, were influencing everything the Mediterranean, were introducing also the worship to the one that was by all appearances useless: the love for the beauty, the pleasure of thinking and talking simply for the pleasure of doing it and also the pleasure of writing, reciting, doing; in a word, the pleasure of creating. The Greeks don’t want to leave of side the sport, since this activity was representing the accomplishment of an effort for the simple pleasure of competing, gaining as much the symbolic and only prize of a branch of olive tree...”*

According to Pilar Llana (1985), the Mediterranean is still a highly important conduit of communication, rather than a major barrier between peoples. During the 1989 symposium in Toulouse titled *“Echanges culturels dans le bassin occidental de la Méditerranée”*, the Mediterranean Sea was described as the geographic and symbolic element that has done much to shape our cultures. Similarly, the conclusion was reached that Mediterranean countries share a certain common dimension (Mansau et al., 1989)². This is the concept of Mediterranean-ness, which is the cultural fusion that has occurred over centuries, the effects of which can supposedly be seen in the daily life of the different peoples living around the Mare Nostrum.

The spread of toys and games since Greek and Roman times, and even since the Egyptian civilisation, was a consequence of the common substratum that is the Mediterranean tradition Huizinga (1938).

SPARTAN EDUCATION VERSUS PLAY

Sparta did not have an army; it was an army. The small population of Lacedaemon was effectively the first military State in history: its inhabitants were pawns, whose sole purpose was the complete acceptance of and submission to the laws and interests of their homeland. Since then, the term Spartan has been used to describe anything reminiscent of ascetic rules and the criteria of discipline that were stamped on the life of the Spartans. According to Robert Flacelière (1993:109), the Spartan model of society considered education in a completely different way to how it was approached by other Greek cities. Sparta’s education system in the 5th and 6th centuries BC is the oldest model known for excessive harshness and rigidity. The only concern of the Spartans was to prepare for war. Whereas in Athens young girls were carrying out domestic tasks, in Sparta girls and boys alike played many sports in public, including wrestling, discus and

² “La Méditerranée constitue, en effect, l’élément géographique et symbolique qui rapproche et qui caractérise, en grande partie, nos cultures respectives. Par cette rencontre nous privilégions une certaine dimension transversale, méditerranéenne, autour de laquelle se sont construites nos histoires”.

the javelin, which was a weapon of war. The steely character of these women was forged by the constant drive to improve the race through heredity. They were physically trained so that their offspring would be strong, hardy men fit for the Spartan army.

Flacelière (1993:111) writes that Spartan children remained with their families until seven years of age. They were brought up and trained in a unique way during the first years of their lives. The author quotes Plutarch (1470), who notes that Spartan mothers let their children roam naked and totally free to acclimatise them to inclement weather and to overcome their fears and loneliness, so that the child would not be frightened of the dark and would not cry or scream.

When children reached seven years of age, the State took charge of them until the end of their days. First they were enlisted into pre-military training, before being divided into age groups: from eight to 11 they were known as “cubs” (“*robidas*”, “*promikizomenos*”, “*mikizomenos*”, “*propais*”), from 12 to 15 “youngsters” or adolescents (“*pratopampais*”, “*atropampais*”, “*meilleiren*”), and from 16 to 20 were known as “*irene*”, i.e. ephebes in the first, second, third or fourth year.

Plutarch writes that Spartan children’s studies were limited to only what was necessary, as the rest of the time was given over to learning how to take orders, overcome fatigue and emerge victorious in battle. This training would get harder as time went on. The cruelty of their treatment included having their heads shaved, walking barefoot and playing naked for most of the time. They were whipped for any reason and were very poorly fed, forcing them to search for food on their own and thus learn to be cunning and quick-witted. There is a story of a Spartan boy who captured a young fox and hid it under his cloak. When asked why he carried it beneath his garments in this way, he remained silent. Rather than being discovered, he had allowed the animal to rip apart his insides, and endured the pain until his death.

In the City State of Athens, youngsters aged between seven and 18 years of age led a completely different lifestyle from that of the Spartans. One indication of the different treatment that children in Athens received was the habit of wrapping them tightly in spiralling bandages, whereas the children of Sparta were left naked.

Platon (1969) (*Laws*, 7, 793 e) advises letting children play however they wish up to the age of seven, though still guiding their games towards learning a future trade. Flacelière (1993:119) notes that in Athens there was no “*paedonome*” or education inspector, as there was in Sparta and other Dorian cities. Solon’s laws forced parents to send their children to school at dawn, so as to avoid abuse such as pederasty and other dangers. These laws did not force them to be taught gymnastics, music or grammar, however, or even to attend lessons.

Young Athenians are thought to have started to exercise at around eight years old (though the exact age is not known), directed by a trainer or *paedotribe*. Some interesting aspects of Greek gymnastics were that those involved would be naked (the word gymnastics comes from the Greek word “*gymnos*”, which means nude), oil would be spread all over the body, and the oboe would be played at the same time.

It would seem to be true that most Greek authors rejected early specialisation, as is the case now. The *paedotribes* tried to prevent any excess during physical activity, according to Aristotle (*Politics*, V, 3, 3; *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 2, 6, 335BC), who discouraged music teachers and *paedotribes* from training virtuosos or athletes to triumph in the Olympic Games (Andreu-Cabrera, 2010). The philosopher was in

favour of training youngsters in all kinds of sports without doing specific work any one of them. The overall aim was to achieve perfect balance rather than ensure triumph.

THE WEALTH OF CHILDREN'S PLAY

The great number of toys and games discovered indicate that children did indeed play in ancient Greece. Flacelière reports archaeological findings of clay figures, rattles, horses and other toy animals on wheels, and dolls (some of which even have moving joints). These objects were all designed to amuse and entertain small children. Several authors (AAVV, 1996:174) state that Greek children played with various toys, including the rattle (*"platagē"*), the yo-yo, knucklebones and miniature objects (carriages, tableware, animals, dolls, etc.), generally made from fired clay. These toys were given as gifts on festival days, such as the Dionysia or the Anthesteria. The more ingenious children would make their own toys out of wood, clay or leather. The children's games specialist Jean Pierre Rossie (1993) noted the wealth of toys on another shore of the Mediterranean, and produced some interesting research on dolls made by people in North Africa. López Eire (1980:30) writes that archaeologists have found arsenals of children's toys of all kinds in children's tombs: rattles, dolls (some with moving joints), and horses and other toy animals on wheels to entertain their owners. Games played by Athenian children that have major analogies with games played to this day include a ball game (*"sphaira"*), the spinning top (*"strómbos"*), hide-and-peek (*"kryptínda"*), tug of war (*"helkystínda"*) and soldiers (*"basilínda"*). Another game that has spread to different Mediterranean cultures is knucklebones (*"astrágalo"*), which children played from a very early age until they were old enough to enter the arena or even until the age of ephebes (18 years old). Plutarch (in *The Life of Alcibiades*) and Platon (in two dialogues) both write of how much children in Athens enjoy playing knucklebones. In ancient times Suetonius compiled an extraordinary report of games played in Greece, which unfortunately did not survive to the present day. Another work cataloguing the games and songs of Greek children is the *Onomasticon* by Pollux (170 d.C.) In his book *Días geniales ó lúdicos*, Rodrigo Caro (1978) repeatedly laments the loss of Suetonius' work. Paulette Lequeux (1984:60) points out another kind of archaeological remains in the form of paintings on Greek vases, depicting boys and girls playing hopscotch and knucklebones, jumping, running after a ball, spinning tops, playing on swings, playing hide-and-peek, forming rings, and so on. Writing about blind man's buff, Salazar (1928), notes that the Greeks had a game called *"miada"*, in which a person who was blindfolded had to listen to the shouts and calls of the other players and then try and catch them. A player that was caught would in turn be blindfolded and try to catch the other players. The same author also writes of a variation on this game called metal fly. He claims that the Romans took this game from the Greeks and called it *"collabizare"*. He also states that the Egyptians must have played it, noting that, *"in the games played to the ox Apis, the great priest was blindfolded and the other holy ministers of the gods surrounded him, holding hands. The priest then went round touching the heads of those in the ring one by one, in order to guess the name of one of them, and if successful this person would be named the personal priest of the new god Apis, a position of great importance to which the Egyptians paid homage"*.

According to Flacelière (1993:117), the ball game *"sphaira"* and knucklebones (*astrágalo*) were no doubt played from a young age, and then through to adolescence. The same author provides some interesting details about the first competition for children. He states that from the time of Peisistratos (600-527 BC), the feast of the Panatheas included a competition for children in the five disciplines of the pentathlon, which were wrestling, running, jumping, discus and javelin.

Flacelière (1993:225) notes that children's games in Athens and Greece in general involved balls, hoops, spinning tops, knucklebones, hopscotch, swings, leapfrog and "ephedrismos", a piggyback-based game. They also played marbles, or walnuts, depending on various rules. According to Chapouthier (1954:199), a variation of the game involved throwing a walnut onto three others, perhaps done with enough skill to form a pyramid; the winner would keep the four walnuts. In the game known as "*homilla or delta*", a circle or triangle is drawn on the ground, inside which the thrown walnut must land, and it is assumed that whoever won kept all the walnuts that had landed outside the circle. Another variation used a hole in the ground or a glass, and again it is thought that the winner kept all the walnuts that failed to land inside. Another game involved throwing ceramic tiles or stones onto a line drawn on the ground with the aim of seeing who was closest. Flacelière writes that children and young people performed balancing exercises, according to the drawings on a cup in the Louvre Museum, showing a young man standing on his left leg holding a goblet. Another balancing game was "*ascoliasmos*", a competition in which youngsters would try to stand for as long as possible on a full wineskin rubbed with oil and wine. According to the author, this game was usually played during country feasts in honour of Dionysius. Stilts were also popular. Ball games, of which there were many variations, were widely played by boys and girls, including Nausicaa and her companions in *The Odyssey*. A ceramic bas-relief shows naked young men playing with a ball and curved sticks that resemble those used for the modern-day game of hockey. Adults played ball games in the gymnasium, as there was a walled area set aside for this. Flacelière (1993:226) writes that "*it is hard to distinguish between the games and some exercises ordered by the paedotribe, as these games were played in the open air and were useful for bodily development and flexibility*".

NECESSITY IS THE MOTHER OF CREATIVITY

Hemelryk, (AAVV, 1992:19) writes that any everyday object could be used to play with. Walnuts and chestnuts were used as marbles, and balls were made from rags or leather and stuffed with hair, feathers or vegetable fibres for passing and throwing games. Bones were used for playing knucklebones or dice. The hoop, the yo-yo and board games were all common forms of play (Avedon et al., 1971). Other children's games, such as swimming and diving, were competitive sports, and the author divides Greek children's games into two categories: group games and games of skill. Group games include those played in a ring, although none of the rules or accompanying songs have survived. The author does mention a game called "*turtle-little turtle*" ("*khelikhelone*"), which was played by forming a ring around a girl sitting on the floor. The questions and answers in this game went more or less as follows:

“What are you doing in the middle?
I'm unravelling the wool, removing the Milatos thread
And how did your son die?
From above; he jumped from the white horses into the sea”

The songs were accompanied by music and movement. Another game known as “the piece” (“*ostrakinda*”) involved dividing the group into two sides, who would face each other on either side of a line. They would throw into the air a piece of something (such as from a broken jar) that had a black face painted on one side and nothing on the other (called night and day, or “*nyx*” and “*mera*”). Whoever caught the white piece chased those who touched the black piece, and whoever was caught had to carry the winner on their shoulders like a donkey (“*onos*”). Other Greek games that are still played by children today include tag (“*apodidraskinda*” or “*drapetinda*”), hide-and-seek and blind man’s buff (“*mykinda*”). Even though it is possible to imagine how they developed, we do not know the rules used to play them. The authors write that there were several games such as climbing trees (“*dendrobatein*”), climbing or swinging from a rope (“*élkustinda*”), skimming pebbles (“*epostrakismos*”) and counting the number of bounces (“*almata*”), that were all used to entertain children. Games involving a ball (“*sfaira*”, from where the word “sphere” is derived) were also popular. They were filled with fibres, hair or feathers, rather than being inflated with air as occurs today. This made it difficult to bounce a ball against the ground or a wall. The author describes the surprising image of a game similar to modern hockey or golf. The stick used is probably what was known as a “*keras*” (horn), and the game, “*keretizein*”, may have been played between two teams divided into defence, midfield and attack, on a field with a line across the middle and two lines marking the ends of the playing area.

Other games such as marbles and knucklebones were also very popular, and required more specific skills. Knucklebones (“*astragalos*”) were the small bones of the ankle joint from cloven hoofed livestock (oxen, pigs, sheep, etc.), but other materials were also used, particularly fired clay. Together with marbles or walnuts, they were the most popular game in ancient Greece. Popular acrobatics included the cartwheel, which has survived to this day, and which in ancient times was known as “*trokhon*”, “*mimeisthai*” and “*kybisteter*”.

In ancient paintings it is hard to distinguish the cartwheel from the handstand. Both introduced an element of play into gymnastic exercises, juggling games and other more circus-related exercises (Ricotti, 1994). The word acrobatics, which in modern terms clearly relates to gymnastics, is a Greek word that translates as “walking on tiptoe”. Botermans, Burret, and Van Splunteren (1989:60) write that the first knucklebones were bones from rams (“*astralogoi*”), and were used as an oracle to predict the future. They state that the paintings on jugs and the poems of Homer indicate that this was a game played by divinities and mortals alike. According to the legend, the game was invented by Palamedes, who taught it to soldiers during the Trojan War. However, there is also evidence that it was played earlier in Asia. André (1991:77), provides more details on play and agrees with other authors mentioned above on the games played by children in ancient Greece; ball games (“*sphaira*”) were played by younger and older children in various forms, including one played with sticks, which resembles modern-day golf or hockey. Other games played by Greek children include the hoop, spinning top, hopscotch, swinging, leapfrog, piggyback fights, and games of skill using walnuts, which involved forming a pyramid by throwing them skilfully, or tossing them into a circle drawn in the ground or into a container placed a short distance away.

Despite being considered an adult game (with a version for children), according to these authors, balancing games were often played during certain festivities or banquets, such as “*ascóliamos*”. This was played during the feasts of Dionysius, and was a competition to remain standing for as long as possible with both feet on a wineskin rubbed in oil.

“*Kotabos*” was a very popular target game, although it is thought to have begun as a ceremony held by ancient pagans, which involved spilling wine or liquor in honour of Dionysius. It was very popular in

banquets and involved drinking glasses of wine almost to the end, and flinging the last drops onto a plate. As they dropped one would call out the name of one's love, with accurate aim bringing good luck. Cock fights were another form of entertainment, with much gambling taking place between spectators.

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that a wide range of games was played in the streets of Greece, and there is considerable evidence of toys that were made. These include, but are not limited to, toy horses on wheels, pulled by a string, hobbyhorse sticks, knucklebones, ball games, hide-and-seek, tug of war, blind man's buff, imitation games, hopscotch, leapfrog, racing games (including piggyback races), games with hoops, wrestling games, discus and javelin, games with marbles or walnuts, balancing games, games with a curved stick and ball (similar to modern-day hockey), flexibility exercises, swimming and diving, games played in a ring with music and singing, games with two opposing sides, chasing games, catching games, stone skimming, acrobatics (cartwheels and somersaults) and juggling.

Throughout history, cultural exchanges in the Mediterranean area have been particularly intense: original settlements, migrations, colonisation, conquests, and so on. Constant journeys over land and sea by Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Berbers and Arabs made the Mediterranean into a cultural sub-world, the roots of which have survived to this day (Rodríguez López, 2000). The ongoing cultural exchange between countries from all around the Mediterranean, and the proximity of these countries, may be the cause for such an abundance of analogies (Manson, 1975, 1986). All of the games listed above are still played, and modern versions are very similar. Regarding the similarities between games, Bett (1929:7)³ notes the similarity in details of games with different cultural provenance and the mixture that can occur when different cultures come into contact. It suggests the need for a research method into the origin and meaning of games, drawing comparisons between traditional games that are still played or were played until recently by children from different peoples or civilised countries, analysing the survival of superstitious and primitive elements, and contrasting them with existing practices in present-day or recently disappeared primitive peoples, as well as cultural anthropology studies⁴. Greece may be the starting point for any modern analysis on play among human beings, as Rodrigo Caro (1978) wrote of 350 years ago. His comparative analysis between games played in ancient times and those of the 17th century is a major incentive to continue studying and researching the world of play.

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³ "Different games, based upon a different range of conceptions, present similarities of detail. It is easy enough to detect the primitive meaning here and there, but very often a game of one particular type has become approximated to a game of another type altogether, and the result is a mixture of motive...."

⁴ "It is only by the patient comparison of children's games of various types as they exist in different lands with one another, with all sorts of superstitious survivals in civilized countries, and with existing practices among savage peoples, that the primitive significance of them can be established. Nothing can exhibit the amazing tenacity of popular tradition more clearly than the relics of prehistoric belief and custom which are fossilized in the games that are played by children, generation after generation..."

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