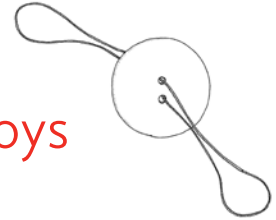


An overview of prehistoric toys



- The paper presents an overview of so far known kinds of children's toys and games from the prehistoric period, i.e., from the earlier stone age to the early iron age, which lasted about six thousand years. Examples of prehistoric culture toys from Croatia and the neighbouring countries are mainly described. Whenever possible, parallels are drawn with toys and games from the ancient Greco-Roman world.

Key words: toys, games, prehistory, antiquity

Very little is known about children's toys and games, an important segment of everyday life. They can only be discussed on the basis of material evidence, but even then satisfactory answers cannot be obtained to the many questions raised by this type of material. More data on children's games and toys used in them are available only in the period between the early stone age (Neolithic) and the early iron age (La Tène), spanning six thousand years (Fig. 1/p. 321). This mainly refers to objects found in settlements, in and around houses, waste pits or, less frequently, in children's graves. They were preserved owing to the durability of the material from which they were made: ceramics, bone and less frequently metal. Ceramic, i.e., baked clay toys prevail, which is not accidental since clay abounds in nature, it lends itself to modelling, and it is hard and resistant after baking. The prevailing form among this toy type are small vessels modelled after vessels used in

everyday life.^{1*2} They were made in smaller dimensions, matching children's age, and some of them are in every detail miniature copies of vessels in everyday use, which offers archaeologists the possibility of their classification in contemporary cultures and, thereby, of more accurate dating. They were indisputably the work of adults who sometimes also made toys for the youngest members of their community along with standard pottery used for cooking, serving and storing food. Among the many examples, we shall only mention a small cup from the 9th century B.C., discovered at Sisak, which, apart from dimensions, displays all the elements of cups from that period (Fig. 2/p. 321).³ In terms of numbers, specimens made by the children themselves, inspired by the work of adults, prevail among the varied small vessels. Most of them are small bowls because making them did not require particular skill. Sometimes a lump of clay sufficed to shape a bowl by pressing it with fingers. Children's fingerprints are found precisely on such small vessels, durably preserved by baking and testifying to the creative efforts of the children in the period under consideration.⁴ However, most of them are small vessels of recognisable form but very crude. Without laboratory analyses which can sometimes also discover papillary lines on the fingerprints,⁵ for most of them one could not reliably claim whether adults made them for children to play with disregarding details or were made by children who had not yet mastered modelling techniques. Namely, in addition to playing with clay, modelling also had an educational function because children were thereby learning skills they would need in a mature age. The art of making pottery for different uses was only one of the activities children had to master as they were growing up. That is why toys were a kind of tools, i.e., unavoidable aids in growing

1* Due to the fact that the author refers to the catalogues in archaeological literature, references are cited in accordance with the principles of citation used by the archaeological profession, i.e., in the footnotes [ed.].

2 Balen-Letunić 1982: 74-82, T. 1-T.8; Balen-Letunić and Rendić-Miočević 2012: 43-50 (cat.1-29, 31-64); Banner 1958: 247, T. 1:1-49; Balj 2009: 31-33 (cat 1-13); Ibid. 2010: 46-47 (cat.1-7); Burkowsky 2009: 291-300 (cat. 1-35).

3 Balen-Letunić 1982: 78 (cat. 36), T. 4:1; Balen-Letunić and Rendić-Miočević 2012: 22, F.9, 48 (cat. 45), for that toy category cf., Balen-Letunić 1982: T.1:5,6,8,10; T.2:12; T.3: 4,6,8;T.4:2,3,5; T.5:4; T.6:3; T.7:1,7.

4 Balen-Letunić 1982: 74 (cat. 4), T.1:4; Balen-Letunić and Rendić-Miočević 2012: 20-21,49 (cat. 54, 55).

5 Primas 1975: T. 42:1-3; Králik and Nejman 2007: 6; Králik and Hložek 2007: 30-42; for papillary lines cf., Galic 2008: 17-42.

up from early childhood to the world of adults. Small bowls discovered in a prehistoric house near Pula,⁶ dating from the 9th-8th centuries B.C., are a case in point. They were found in a pottery kiln along with vessels for everyday use (Fig. 3 and 4/p. 321).

Along with the small ceramic vessels, certainly used by girls in playing, play accessories included small ceramic tables⁷ and chairs, and primarily dolls. Although dolls were undoubtedly favourite girls' toys, toys made of durable material (ceramics) are relatively rare.⁸ It can logically be assumed, therefore, that many toys, including dolls, were made from materials of organic origin, e.g., straw, leather, fabrics, wood, reed and the like. Such toys are subject to faster decay and could not be preserved because of the climate in this part of the world. In addition to the foregoing, other kinds of ceramic toys, the most numerous being figurines of various animals, are also found in prehistoric settlements.⁹ Some of them are easily recognisable, but most of them are nevertheless shaped in unusual and fanciful combinations blending elements of different animal figures. Just like today, at an early age children preferred ceramic rattles of various forms, most frequently animals with inserted pebbles for the sound effect.¹⁰ There is hardly any need to emphasise that children eagerly sought objects from the environment and adapted them imaginatively to their playing. Sand, pebbles, shells, sticks, but also seeds, grass, flowers, fruits and smaller animals have always attracted their interest.

Judging by finds throughout Europe, including Croatia, children liked to play with round flat discs resembling a button with one, or more frequently two holes in the middle. A doubled rope was run through the holes and tied at the end, and when the plaque was spun quickly with a tight rope it produced a buzzing sound (Fig. 5 and 6/p. 322). This simple toy entertained children throughout history and “survived” unchanged for thousands of years. Actually, until the mid-20th century it was the favourite toy for generations of rural and suburban children, who made the toy themselves by using different materials (wood, thick cardboard, sheet metal etc.) or, instead of makeshift discs, a larger button. The contrivance produced a buzzing sound like a “button-

6 Mihovilić 2001: 22-23.

7 Balen-Letunić 2012: 18, Fig. 5, 5-46 (cat, 24, 30).

8 Amstler et al. 1993: 23-24, Fig. 15; Baker and Vianello 1973: 5-6.

9 Balj 2010: 41, 47 (cat. 8); Cordie 2008: 11, Fig. 20.

10 Amstler et al. 1993: 11-13; Fig. 6; Cordie 2008: 11, Fig. 20.

style” spinner.¹¹ The discovered round ceramic discs with no holes in the middle (tokens) suggest games run according to set patterns drawn or carved on a hard base – packed earth or ceramic, wood or stone slab. There are no data on such patterns or the rules according to which the “tokens” were moved in different directions because the prehistoric communities in this part of the world left no written traces. Unlike prehistory, such games were very popular in ancient, Greco-Roman times, and owing to written sources the game patterns and rules are known.¹² Many of them precede today’s games; thus, the game known as “draughts” has retained some elements of the Roman game called *ludus latrunculum*¹³, and the “mill” game resembles the Roman *duodecim scripta*.¹⁴ This game was played, regardless of age or social class, throughout the Roman Empire, and according to literary sources it was very popular among soldiers. Games with astragals, hooped-animal knuckle-bones, also captured the attention of older children and adults. Because of their regular form and dimensions suitable for playing sheep and goat bones were used most frequently. That very old game, which preceded dice games, was very popular in both ancient and mediaeval times; it is still played in some parts of the world, e.g. in Mongolia and Greece. For the same reasons applicable to the previously mentioned games, the rules for the astragals game in prehistoric times are unknown. It would be difficult to say whether they at least resembled the games mentioned by Homer in *Iliad*, the Greek historian Plutarch and the travel writer Pausanias, and many others.¹⁵ According to these sources, the youthful gods Eros and Ganymede killed time by playing with astragals; it was also popular among children, especially girls (Fig. 7/p. 322). In addition to animal bones, astragals were also made of bronze, precious metals, glass, rock crystal, ivory or ceramics, and were carried in special small vessels or leather or linen pouches (Fig. 8/p. 322). This harmless children’s game was subsequently taken up by adults and soon it was

11 Then as well as today it was used both as a toy and as an instrument; cf. Galin 2003: 9.

12 Amstler et al. 1993: 25-27; Buchholz 1982: 67-73, sl. 1-9, 11; Kunac 2007: 12-15. For tokens cf., Ožanić, Radman-Livaja and Rendić-Miočević 2003: 33, 113-114 (cat. 265-270); Balen-Letunić and Rendić-Miočević 2012: 60 (cat. 131-134)

13 Amstler et al. 1993: 36.

14 Amstler et al. 1993: 37; Balen-Letunić and Rendić-Miočević 2012: 39, Fig. 11, 60 (cat.135).

15 Il, 23, 88; Bakarić 22008: 118-119.

used for gambling and fortune-telling.¹⁶ Any of the thirty-five combinations possible with astragals casting had a name and value. The winning but rare combination, where ever astragal had to fall on a different surface, was called Aphrodite or Venus. Along with skill, such a combination also called for luck, and its representation was used for luck on different object, especially on anchor arms.¹⁷ A set of astragals was discovered in a man's grave from the 5th century B.C. in Nesactium, the old capital of the Histri (Fig. 9 /p. 322). It was put into the grave to help him "play" or maybe for luck to follow him in "life" after death.¹⁸

Apart from the mentioned games, just as today there are many games that do not require any toys. Maybe some of them were like "play tag", "black queen", "morra" or other games played by generations. But we can only assume the existence of such games.

Finally, one needs to emphasize the fact that children's games and toys, one of the manifestations of the life of prehistoric communities, have been paid very little attention in the study of archaeological material. At the same time, there are growing signs that research of this topic and the publication of its results appear to attract more interest.¹⁹ Regardless of the fact that the many objects of this kind belong to accidental finds or derive from old, inadequately studied explorations, these small, apparently modest and insignificant objects do not only provide an insight into the range of prehistoric toys but also reflect children's imaginativeness, skill and creativity and the adults' care for the youngest members of their communities in very old times.²⁰

TRANSLATED BY: JANKO PARAVIĆ

16 Amstler et al. 1993: 8-10, Fig. 4; Jurišić 1996: 66-68; Bakarić 2008: 117-120, Fig. 1-8, cat. (1-7).

17 Radić Rossi 2005: 149-150, Figs. 10, 11.

18 Mihovilić 1996: 36-37, T-21; 338-348; T.22: 349:354.

19 Spiegel and Tschofen 1988: 9-16; Bausinger 1988: 17- 31; Condrau 2006: 7-9; Balj 2011: 113-139.

20 It has not been possible to publish facts about many toys by a method relevant for the analysis of archaeological material because of the set formal framework; moreover, that would not be appropriate for an ethnological publication. Accordingly, a summarised informative overview of the most frequently used toys has been presented.

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