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# Hoops and Coming of Age in Greek and Roman Antiquity<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Ancient hoops, usually made of wood or metal, do not survive archaeologically, but literary and iconographic representations provide information regarding the materials used, ergonomics, as well as their symbolic and cultural values. Hoops were intimately associated with youth, especially male, and this paper aims at expanding the understanding of their collective, social and religious dimensions for boys and young men. In ancient Greece, the hoop was used in physical training at the *palaestra* and in the gymnasium. In Rome, it was associated with an idealized image of Greek athleticism and used in public spaces, such as the Campus Martius. These hoop based activities demonstrate the porosity of the boundaries between entertainment, performance, sport, and competition. The symbolic association of the hoop toy with the life passages of young men is expressed by metaphorical images. In Greek iconography, the hoop is the attribute of Ganymede, abducted by Zeus on Olympus, eternally young among the gods. The image of a mortal player in a funerary context thus transmits the hope of a form of immortality in a blessed afterlife. In Roman pictures, the hoop is transformed into the wheel of *Tuchē*, as a symbol of fate, or takes a cosmic dimension in the form of the zodiacal ring.

## Keywords

Game, Ganymede, hoop, life passage, leisure, spinning top, sport, toy, wheel, youth.

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Apart from a few 19<sup>th</sup> century researchers<sup>2</sup>, little in-depth discussions have examined the function of ancient hoops. Modern scholars usually incidentally mention Greek and Roman hoops as ludic devices associated with physical training and leisure in Classical antiquity<sup>3</sup>. Like other games, however, hoop rolling also transmits cultural values, revealed by the kind of skills based training, the social context of the play, and the set of associated activities, involving individuals of specific age groups, sex and social status. The image of the hoop is also used as a metaphorical operator based on widely shared visual and literary references which shed new light on ancient views about youth and the symbolic agency of play.

This paper will focus on the collective, male, dimension of the game in Greek and Roman societies<sup>4</sup>. Firstly, a number of methodological questions will be addressed relating to hoop materials, for example, organic or metal, self-made, specially manufactured or recycled, and ergonomics controlled using a stick or hook. Secondly, I will attempt to identify the players (age group, social status), the context and the aim of their activities (collective or solitary, in public or private spaces, as leisure, athletic training or competition), and thirdly, explore the symbolic and metaphorical values of the hoop, in particular those associated with coming of age and life passages of young men in ancient Greece.

### **Materiality and ergonomics**

No ancient Greek or Roman hoop is archaeologically recorded, primarily due to being fabricated from degradable organic materials, for example willow twigs, or recycled devices, like wooden or metal bands from a barrel or wheel tyre<sup>5</sup>. Some ancient authors describe hoops, mostly in the Roman period, and often very briefly. Greek and Latin vocabulary, however, delivers a privileged access to the collective imaginary dimension of the object, whereas visual representations provide evidence about its size and ergonomics.

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<sup>2</sup> Becq de Fouquières 1869, 159-170; Lafaye 1873.

<sup>3</sup> In ancient sport: Harris 1972, pp. 133-141.

<sup>4</sup> On women acrobats using hoops, e.g. Xenophon, *Symposium*, 2.8; Dasen 2019a.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Man making a ring, or hoop, with a rope or twig on a red-figure Lucanian oinochoe, c. 340 BCE; Paris, Louvre K 547.

[http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car\\_not\\_frame&idNotice=11883&langue=fr](http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=11883&langue=fr)

### ***Materiality***

The Greek and Latin words for “hoop” are associated with a circular rotation as well as speed, suggesting swift movement and racing.

In Greek, the commonest word, *trochos*, ὁ τροχός, is related with *trechō*, “I run”<sup>6</sup>. The term may mean a wheel, circle or other objects of similar shape, such as a ring, pill, or cake, as well as rotating items, like spinning tops, potter’s wheel, or the sundisk. When the accent is placed on the first *omicron*, τροχός, the word means a circular race or a running space. These two different meanings dependent on the accent placement has misled the reading of an often-quoted passage of Hippocrates in *Regimen in Health* (2.63.3), interpreted by Émile Littré as a description of racing with a hoop in the gymnasium: “*La course au cerceau dilate le moins la chair, elle l’atténue et la contracte ainsi que le ventre surtout, parce que, précipitant le plus la respiration, elle attire l’humide le plus rapidement.*” (*Du Régime*, Littré VI 579-581). Hippocrates actually describes different types of runs, and modern editions have replaced τροχός with τρόχος, “the run”, as in Loeb edition: “Running in a circle dissolves the flesh least, but reduces and contracts the flesh and the belly most, because, as it causes the most rapid respiration, it is the quickest to draw the moisture to itself” (*Regimen in Health*, transl. W.H.S. Jones, Loeb)<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, *trochos* and *trochazein* in Euripides (*Medea*, 46-47) and Theophrastus (*Characters*, 14.10) mean circular running, not hoop rolling. *Krikos*, “the ring”, describes a hoop in a first century BC honorary decree in Priene<sup>8</sup>, and *krikēlasia*, “hoop-driving”, after ἐλαύνω, “to drive, to strike”, is found in Antyllus, a Greek medical author of the Roman imperial period (2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE), quoted by Oribasius (4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE)<sup>9</sup>. In Latin, beside *trochus*, the Latinized form of the Greek *trochos*, *orbis* similarly means a circle or a disc-shaped object as well as a circular motion or rotation. *Rota*, “the wheel”, is also found describing the toy. Martial (*Epigrams*, 14.168) uses *trochus* and *rota* as synonyms. The late Latin *circellus*, diminutive of *circus* “circle”, is associated with the French *cercel* for the stave of a barrel (12<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> See Liddell, Scott, Jones, s.v. τροχός/τρόχος:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Dtroxo%2Fs1>

<sup>7</sup> Same reading in the edition by R. Joly, Belles Lettres, CUF.

<sup>8</sup> *IPriene* 112; see also Strabo, *Geography*, 5.3.8.

<sup>9</sup> *Collectiones medicae*, 6.26, ed. J. Raeder, *Corpus Medicorum Graecorum* VI.1.1, Leipzig and Berlin, Teubner, 1928. Antyllus uses also τροχός.

<sup>10</sup> *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* 1835, s.v. cerceau: “cercle en bois léger que les enfants font courir devant eux comme une roue”. The etymology of the word “hoop” is uncertain, after Old English \*hop,

The poet Martial (1<sup>st</sup> cent. CE) paid great attention to children's ability to transform everyday objects into toys<sup>11</sup>. He observed that they easily knew how to use a wheel tyre as a hoop: "Hoop (*trochus*). The wheel (*inducenda rota*) must be fitted with a tyre. You give me a useful present. This will be a hoop (*trochus*) to boys (*pueri*), but a tyre (*cantus*) to me" (*Epigrams*, 14.169; transl. D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Loeb). Actual wheels, used as toys, appear in a few pictures displaying imaginary contests, as on the famous courtyard mosaic floor of the imperial palace in Constantinople. Four children are running, each with two small wheels controlled by a stick (fig. 1; 5<sup>th</sup> cent. CE)<sup>12</sup>. The children wear blue or green tunics, mimicking the Blues and Greens factions. They run around the *metae* or conical poles with great skill and concentration – one looking backwards at his rival, as though they were real charioteers in the hippodrome.



Figure 1. Mosaic floor, courtyard of the Palace (5<sup>th</sup> cent. CE).

Istanbul, Great Palace Mosaic Museum (5<sup>th</sup> cent. CE). Photo Dick Osseman.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Istanbul\\_Mosaic\\_Museum\\_dec\\_2016\\_1527\\_Panorama.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Istanbul_Mosaic_Museum_dec_2016_1527_Panorama.jpg) Creative Commons International license.

The motif derives from earlier depictions of Eroses similarly bowling small disks on third century children's sarcophagi, sometimes in the agonistic context of

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"curve, ring".

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Crawford 2009 on the toy stage in objects' biography.

<sup>12</sup> Brett 1942, 37, pl. 10a.

a circus race suggested by a *meta* or pole<sup>13</sup>. On some Roman period gems, set in a ring or pendant, Eros or Hermes roll a wheel like a hoop (Hermes and Hermes-Thot: e.g. CBd-440, 441, 2453, 1673). Both gods have special associations to children, Eros being a child himself and Hermes their divine patron. However, the scenes have a metaphorical meaning and should not be taken literally: the wheel is not a toy but refers to the wheel of Nemesis-Tuchē, an image of fate. This symbolic image of the *trochos* is ancient; it is articulated in a lost play by Sophocles:

But my fate is always revolving on the fast-moving wheel of the goddess and changing its nature, just as the appearance of the moon cannot remain for two nights in the same shape, but first emerges from obscurity as new, making its face more beautiful and coming to fullness, and when it is at its loveliest, it dissolves once more and comes to nothing.”(Sophocles, fr. 871, uncertain tragedy; transl. H. Lloyd-Jones, Loeb).

A glass paste in the British Museum (fig. 2; 1<sup>st</sup> cent. BCE) depicts Eros controlling a six-spoke wheel, demonstrating his divine agency over love.



Figure 2. Gem of glass paste imitating sard (1<sup>st</sup> cent. BCE). London, The British Museum, 1923,0301.489. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Antyllus is the only author providing details regarding the size and appearance of hoops used in the training of young men: “It should be less in diameter than a man’s height, reaching about to his chest.” He adds that “small rings”, *leptoi krikoi*, were strung onto the hoop, elements which do not seem to belong to the Classical Greek toy. Roman authors often allude to these tinkling rings, probably metal, like the hoop, which were purposefully fabricated. Several wall paintings and stucco reliefs in Vesuvian cities (1<sup>st</sup> cent. CE) illustrate these elaborate, luxurious hoops with rings. A wall panel in the *House of epigrams* in Pompei (fig. 3), depicts two types of noisy hoops: on the left, a hoop with three small rings leans

<sup>13</sup> Huskinson 1996, cat. 6.33, pl. XII, 4; Dimas 1998, cat. 410, pl. 14, 4, cat. 413, pl. 15, 1.

against a hydria, and on the right, another rests against a krater this time with three leaf-like items,<sup>14</sup> possibly nailed to the hoop, like the bells or coins painted in 1560 by Pieter Bruegel the Elder for his “Children’s Games”<sup>15</sup>.



Figure 3. Watercolour reproduction of a wall-painting, Pompei V, 1, 18, House of the Epigrams, now lost (1<sup>st</sup> cent. CE). After <http://arachne.uni-koeln.de/item/marbilder/5022204>

The stick driving the hoop is called in Greek *elatēr* or *rhabdos*, “the rod”. Most Classical Greek depictions show a straight stick (fig. 5, 8, 10), but a few have a curved end. On an attic red-figure jug (fig. 4; c. 460 BCE), a naked servant boy holds in the left hand a serving tray, and trundles a hoop with a curved rod in the right one. Most likely he is serving food to banqueters and the painter may have added the hoop in order to transform him into the cup-bearer Ganymed, and hence allude to the space of the symposion as Olympus<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Ling 1971, cat. 15; <http://arachne.uni-koeln.de/item/marbilder/5022204> with earlier bibliography. See also two similar still life paintings, now lost: Bayaradi *et al.* III, 1782, p. 73: <https://www.e-rara.ch/zut/content/pageview/361952>; 181: <https://www.e-rara.ch/zut/content/pageview/362060>.

<sup>15</sup> Hills 1957, game 18, pp. 27-28; Orrock 2012, fig. 3.

<sup>16</sup> A similar jug by the same painter, possibly from the same tomb, depicts a servant holding a ladle and an oinochoe to be refilled in the mixing bowl; Neils/Oakley 2003, fig. 65. See also the curved stick held by a boy on a funerary relief from Lycia, c. 460 BCE, Athens, National Museum 1825; Dasen 2018, fig. 9.

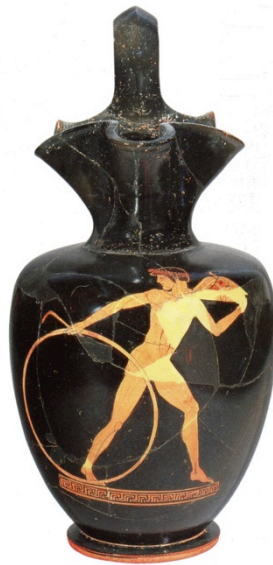


Figure 4. Attic red figure oinochoe (c. 460 BCE). Tampa Museum of Art, Joseph Veach Noble Collection 1986.073. After Neils/Oakley 2003, fig. 76 c.

The Latin *clavis*, “the key”, refers to a new sinuous or hook-like shape<sup>17</sup>, depicted on several images (fig. 3, 6, 7, 9a). Antyllus adds that the material of this new type of rod (*elatēr*) is made of iron, with a wooden handle.

### ***Ergonomics***

In ancient Greece, hoop ergonomics may be observed in Classical vase painting. On Attic vases, the toy is depicted in different sizes, usually reaching waist height, however, some were smaller – possibly reflecting the player’s age or the varying availability of material. The hoop was usually driven with a stick and various motions to ensure success. For example, hitting the top of the hoop with the stick, as pictured by Ganymede holding being pursued by Zeus on a red-figure amphora in New York (fig. 5; 460–450 BCE)<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Propertius, *Elegies*, 3.14.6-7: “the hooked stick rings against the rolling hoop”, *inrepat et uersi clavi adunca trochi* (transl. G. P. Goold, Loeb).

<sup>18</sup> Kaempf-Dimitriadou 1979, pp. 7-12, pp. 76-79; Sichtermann 1988, pp. 154-169.





Figure 5. Attic Nolan neck-amphora (460–450 BCE). New York, MMA inv. 96.18.74.

Photo Museum. Public domain.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/246589>.

The player's hand may be used to control the hoop, as illustrated on a white-ground lekythos in the British Museum (fig. 10a; 440-435 BCE) - a boy walks gently touching the side of the hoop with a stick, held in his right hand, while his left hand rests on top, ensuring the hoop remains upright. Little information is available from Roman times about the use and complexity of play with hoops. On a sard gem in Berlin (fig. 6; 1<sup>st</sup> cent. BCE)<sup>19</sup>, a player holds a curved stick in each hand, probably in order to perform special tricks, with one or two hoops simultaneously – like the children of the Constantinople mosaic (fig. 1).

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<sup>19</sup> Ex. Stosch collection; <http://arachne.uni-koeln.de/item/marbilder/2688966>.



Figure 6. Sard gem (1<sup>st</sup> cent. BCE).

Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Antikensammlung FG 927. © Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Antikensammlung. Photo Ingrid Geske.

Another sard in Berlin (fig. 7; 1<sup>st</sup> cent. BCE)<sup>20</sup> shows a player using a stick to guide a hoop while running and looking behind.



Figure 7. Sard gem (1<sup>st</sup> cent. BCE). Berlin Staatliche Museen, Antikensammlung FG 928 (ex. Stosch collection). © Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Antikensammlung. Photo Ingrid Geske.

<sup>20</sup> Ex. Stosch collection For a similar scene of run on a sard, Weiss 2013, fig. on p. 34; cf. the use of a hooked rod in the Victorian games <http://www.victoriana.com/antiquetoys/rollinghoop.html>.

Antyllus mentions acrobatic movements implying skilful control of the hoop: “It should be bowled not simply in a straight line, but ‘wandering’ (*peplanēmenōs*)”, including jumping (*diekpēdan te kai diatrēkein*),” possibly between two hoops (Pietrobelli 2020). The difficulty attracted onlookers who commented on the performance, as Horace notes: “if unskilled in ball or quoit or hoop, remains aloof, lest the crowded circle break out in righteous laughter” (*The Art of Poetry*, 379-381; transl. H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb). In exile, Ovid wrote about hoop trundling as an *ars*, requiring teaching and training: “See, another tells in verse of the various forms of balls and the way they are thrown; this one instructs in the art of swimming, that in the art of the hoop.” (*Tristia*, 485-486; transl. A.L. Wheeler, revised by G.P. Goold, Loeb). The driving of the hoop also generated a specific soundscape commented on by several authors. In his third *Elegy* (3.14.6-7), the poet Propertius (23 CE) brings to mind the ringing of the hooked stick against the rolling hoop in an imaginary Laconian gymnasium, where girls and boys train together. The clattering of the metallic rings strung on the hoop, *garrulus anulus*, increased the noise. Martial mentions that the sound warned passers-by to get out of the way, implying that the hoop could be rolled at some distance from the player: “Why do noisy rings wander round the wide circle? So that the crowd in their path may yield to the tinkling hoops” (*Epigrams*, 14.169; transl. D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Loeb). In *The Olympic Discourse* (12.37), Dio Chrysostom (1st cent. CE) confirms that the toy may be permitted to roll freely on its own; he compares the dynamic of creation with the motion of the toy: “as the boys do with their hoops, which they set in motion of their own accord, and then let them roll along of themselves” (transl. J.W. Cohoon, Loeb)<sup>21</sup>.

### Social context and identity

Hoop rolling belongs to the cultural fabric of age-classes. It characterizes youth in Greek as well as in Roman written and iconographic evidence. In *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus Empiricus (160-210 CE) defines how games change during the course of life, and associates hoop and balls to young individuals: “Moreover, those who differ in age are differently moved in respect of choice and avoidance. For whereas children, *paides* – to take a case – are all eagerness for balls and hoops, *trochoi*, men in their prime choose other things, and old men yet others” (1.106;

<sup>21</sup> Cf. “the hoop nuisance” of hoop racing in the streets and footpaths in 19th century towns, leading to confiscation and prohibition. E.g. *The Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 18 August 1858, 3 (Tasmania, Australia <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/3249974>)

transl. R.G. Bury, Loeb). On a pelike by the Hermonax painter in Basel, hoop rolling takes place in the gymnasium, marked by herms below each handle (fig. 8; 470-460 BCE)<sup>22</sup>. On one side, Zeus is grasping the shoulder of Ganymede who is holding the hoop stick. The irruption of the god disturbs another game of the same age class: behind Zeus, a second boy holds a large spinning top in one hand and a whip in the other; on the back, four young men flee, in the middle a white-haired man stands, perhaps the paidotribe<sup>23</sup>.



Figure 8. Attic red-figure pelike (470-460 BCE). Basel, Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig Inv. BS 483. © Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig.

Photo Andreas F. Voegelin.

Hoop trundling, like top spinning and ball play in the gymnasium, is evidence of the porosity of the boundaries between play and sport<sup>24</sup>. The major difference is that these physical activities were never part of athletic *agōnes*, prize-winning competitions, though boys, *paides*, and beardless youths, *ageneioi* had age specific competitions. Hoop races probably occurred, however, no public performance has been recorded. Other forms of running involving young boys or men are documented,

<sup>22</sup> Sichtermann 1988, cat. 40, pl. 79.

<sup>23</sup> Dasen 2018, fig. 6a-b; Dasen 2019, pp. 54-55, fig. 1a-1b.

<sup>24</sup> Golden, in press.

such as evening torch races, *lampadedromia*, relays which were held during various festivals, probably because of their relation to religious activities. However, like hoops, *lampadedromia* were not regarded as athletic events<sup>25</sup>.

The cultural importance of hoop rolling goes beyond entertainment and leisure. Beside physical motricity, children and young men were trained in highly valued moral and mental competences, involving concentration, endurance, and social skills because of the team aspects of the play<sup>26</sup>. An inscription in honour of the gymnasiarch Aulus Aemilius Zosimos in Priene (1<sup>st</sup> cent. BCE)<sup>27</sup>, records that he gave to the ephebes various training devices, including a punch-bag (*kōrukos*), hoops (*krikoi*), and weapons (*hopla*) in order to achieve “resolute” (*aoknoi*) bodies, as well as to promote virtue (*arētē*) and control human vicissitudes (*pathos anthrōpinon*). The training was regarded as difficult and successful mastery of the apparatus was rewarded. In Artemidorus’ *Book on Dreams* (1.55), playing the hoop means enduring a hard time, *ponos*, but ending with great satisfaction.

Antyllus provides an extensive description of the expected health benefits of hoop bowling (*krikēlasia*)<sup>28</sup>. The training contributed to balancing body and mind: it “can relax tight parts and make supple stiff parts [...] thanks to the multiple body positions; it can strengthen and relax the weakened nerves, excite the heat, and restore an intelligence, *dianoia*, stunned or disturbed by the effect of black bile”; for the author, the sound of the tinkling rings added “distraction and pleasure to the soul”. Hoop bowling aided the acquisition of a sense of rhythm contributing to an ideal harmony between body and mind – reminding too of the spherical shape of the universe and of primordial androgynies in Platonic philosophy<sup>29</sup>. The stucco decoration of the so-called neo-Pythagorean Basilica di Porta Maggiore, in Rome, contains several scenes with hoops and balls, suggesting that these exercises had a function in Pythagorean ideals<sup>30</sup>.

As in Greece, Roman hoop bowling formed part of collective youth training and hence of a socially constructed experience with a strong agonistic ideal. Athleticism, associated with prizes and victory, is a theme particular to Roman child

<sup>25</sup> on torch races at Athenian festivals, Kyle 1987, pp. 190-193.

<sup>26</sup> Brougère 2005.

<sup>27</sup> IPriène 112, l. 72-76. [http://www.attalus.org/docs/other/inscr\\_175.html](http://www.attalus.org/docs/other/inscr_175.html). Greek text: <https://epigraphy.packhum.org/text/252912>; Harris 1972, p. 135, n. 91.

<sup>28</sup> On these benefits, see also Pietrobelli 2020.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Plato, *Symposium*, 190a; Karfik 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Teja 1994; on rhythm acquired in early childhood thanks to rattling for Archytas, Dasen 2017.

sarcophagi<sup>31</sup>. The players are usually young, depicted as Eroses, and race with vivid interactions; the run often mimics a chariot race in a circus including victory emblems, usually palm branches<sup>32</sup>. Whether or not actual hoop races took place and ended with prizes for children is unclear, however, images allude to such practices. These build an imaginary discourse where play is a projection onto adult life. In a *Satire* (2.3.168-178), Horace reports how the observation of children's play could inform on their maturity and future social behaviour.

The Roman ideological context differs from the Greek. In Rome, the exercise was part of an idealized image of Greek athleticism, mixing intellectual and physical exercises (Pietrobelli 2020). On the Campus Martius, training started in spring (Strabo 5.3.8). Several authors describe these activities which were not competitive but rather public performances, especially for the elite youth, *iuuenes*, who were expected to reach the highest positions in the army and administration. In *The Art of Love* (3.383-384), Ovid records the range of activities: "Swift balls have they [men], and javelins and hoops and armour, and the horse that is trained to go in circles" (transl. J. H. Mozley, revised by G. P. Goold, Loeb)<sup>33</sup>. In Roman iconography, the hoop is a metaphorical image of this Hellenised elite youth. In still life scenes (fig. 3), the jug alludes to the water used by the athletes to wash after exercise, probably taken from the Aqua Virgo aqueduct (Weiss 2013).

Some despised such training as unsuited to Roman sensibilities. Horace (*Ode*, 3.24) reports ironically how in his time young men were unacquainted with horse riding, or hunting, but were more skilled in play, *ludere doctior*. He associates hoop and dice gambling in the same depreciative view: "to fool with a Greek hoop, *Graeco trocho*, or you prefer forbidden dice, *alea*" (transl. N. Rudd, Loeb). This negative view was not wide shared. The growing integration of Greek athleticism in Roman daily life is evidenced by the mosaic decoration of Roman baths and *palaestra* where athletic training took place. In the public bathing complex of Porta Marina in Ostia (fig. 9; 120-130 CE)<sup>34</sup>, the mosaic floor of the *apodyterium* or changing room, close to the *palaestra*, shows a range of athletic activities: boxing, wrestling, weightlifting, discus throwing. In the centre, two objects symbolise the ultimate Greek gymnasium: the hoop and its hook, leaning up against a herm with a bearded head

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<sup>31</sup> Dimas 1998, pp. 155-162.

<sup>32</sup> Amedick 1991, pp. 101-102; Huskinson 1996, p. 17, pp. 44-45, cat. 1.35, pl V, 1; cat. 6.19, pl. XII, 1-3; cat. 6.31; cat. 6.41.

<sup>33</sup> See also Ovid, *Tristia*, 3.12.20; Decker/Thuillier 2004, pp. 159-168.

<sup>34</sup> Newby 2002, Newby 2005, pp. 49-58, fig. 3.3; Decker/Thuillier 2004, p. 173, fig. 101.

evoking a philosopher. Beside the herm, a table with prizes, a spiked crown and a palm branch, allude to public competition and athletic festivals, most likely merging daily activities with an ideal image of athleticism<sup>35</sup>.

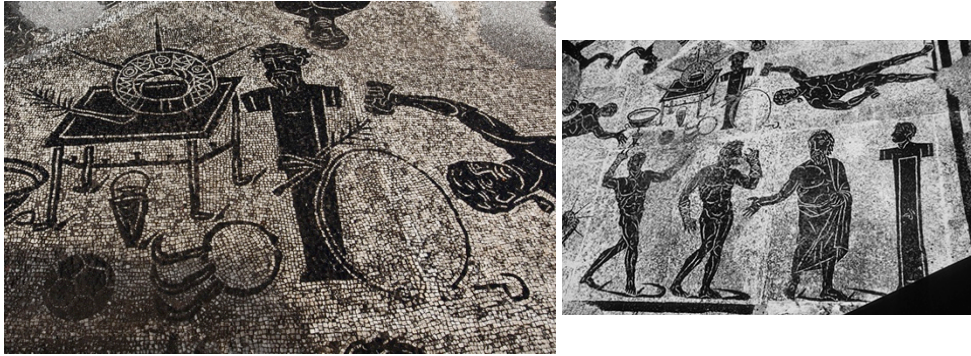


Figure 9a. Mosaic floor of the apodyterium, Baths of Porta Marina, Ostia IV, X, 1-2, in situ (120-130 CE). Photo Roger B. Ulrich (detail).

[https://www.flickr.com/photos/roger\\_ulrich/30947878534](https://www.flickr.com/photos/roger_ulrich/30947878534).

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### Hoop and life passages

The image of hoop rolling may express a deeper metaphorical meaning. On a white-ground attic lekythos (fig. 10 a, b; 440-435 BCE), the play takes place alongside a grave, before a funerary stela standing on a base.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. hoop, ephedrimos and ball play in the baths of Titus; Ponce 1786, pl. 17, <https://bibliotheque-numerique.inha.fr/viewer/15956/?offset=#page=50&viewer=picture&o=bookmark&n=0&q=>.



Figure 10 a, b. White ground lekythos (440-435 BCE). London, The British Museum 1920,1221,3. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

On the left, an anonymous, naked, young boy with long hair, walks forward, head bent, focused on rolling his hoop. On the right, a bearded man, draped in a black himation, looks at him, leaning on a long stick; he stretches the right hand towards the child who does not look at him, absolutely fixated on the hoop. Traditionally, the scene is interpreted as alluding to a moment of daily life entertainment, and to a homoerotic relationship between two men<sup>36</sup>. Another possible reading challenges this view. The image of the hoop rolling may relate the child to Ganymede, without eroticism, but with an eschatological hope.

The story of the Trojan prince Ganymede is well known. He belonged to a ca-

<sup>36</sup> E.g. Oakley 2004, p. 175: "it illustrates another pastime, this one with unmistakable erotic overtones [...] Undoubtedly, the ancient viewer would have perceived the two figures on this lekythos as representing an *erastes* and *eromenos*".



tegrity of young people struck down by an untimely death, in the prime of life. In funerary poetry, such brutal end is often compared to an abduction, described with the verb *harpazein* and its derivatives which imply aggression. The kidnappers (the Moirai, Hades, or the Harpies), take the young dead in the gloomy underground realm of the dead<sup>37</sup>. Ganymede's fate is different. He is abducted by Zeus on Olympus because of his exceptional beauty. He escapes death and the kingdom of Hades to enjoy eternal life as a quasi divine immortal youth. The story is first told in the *Iliad* (20, 231-235), where Aeneas describes the destiny of the young prince:

And Erichthonius begat Tros to be king among the Trojans, and from Tros again three peerless sons were born, Ilus, and Assaracus, and godlike Ganymedes that was born the fairest of mortal men; wherefore the gods caught him up on high to be cupbearer to Zeus by reason of his beauty, that he might dwell with the immortals (transl. A.T. Murray, Loeb).

In the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (200-206), the "golden-haired Ganymedes", pours drink for the gods, "a wonder to see, ho-noured by all the immortals as he draws the red nectar from the golden bowl" (transl. M.L. West, Loeb). The fate of Ganymede is thus a privileged one. As Daniele Auger (2008) has shown, the announcement of his successful transformation soothes the distress of his father.

Classical Greek vases, usually made for wine drinking, depict the hoop as an attribute of the prince pursued by Zeus and the vessel type points to his future role as cupbearer on Olympus<sup>38</sup>. The unusual depiction of the hoop rolling boy on a lekythos (fig. 10a), a vessel used for funerary rites, may refer to the fate of Ganymede on another metaphorical level. Instead of a lover, the man on the right could be the father wishing for his child, lost in the radiance of beauty, eternal youth on Olympus, honoured among the gods, like Ganymede. The rolling motion of the hoop contributes to expressing a passage from the world of the living to that of the dead. The image of cosmic circular motion is recurrent in Plato. In *Phaedrus* (247 bc) it describes the ascent of souls into heaven. In Aristotle's *Physics* (223b), the circle (*kuklos*) is a metaphor of time<sup>39</sup>. The scented oil contained in the lekythos conveys a similar image of transformation. In funeral rites, fragrant essences participate in metamorphosing the mortal body into a new, immortal, one, with eternal youthful beauty.

The hoop, as an image of passage and transformation, associated with the hope

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<sup>37</sup> Vermeule 1979, 164-171; VÉrilhac II, 1982, pp. 173-185, esp. pp. 179-185.

<sup>38</sup> Kaempf-Dimitriadou 1979, pp. 7-12, pp. 76-79; Sichtermann, 1988, pp. 154-169; Dasen 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Gury 1984 and Spadini in press, on the image of the zodiacal ring as a hoop.

of immortality is found on a white ground lekythos in Milano (c. 470 BCE). A naked young man is running. His hoop moves quickly, driven by sharp blows, the stick held in his raised right hand. The hoop encircles his stretched right leg, suggesting his future capture. The boy holds, in his left hand, a rooster which identifies him as a *pais kalos*, and he turns his head back towards an invisible presence. The composition allows recognising him as Ganymede, about to be kidnapped by Zeus<sup>40</sup>.

The literary theme of abduction by deities who tear the child away from death appears later, during the Hellenistic period. A series of funerary epigrams present the death of the child as an abduction by the Nymphs. As Doralice Fabiano (2014) has shown, the abduction by nymphs was a way of denying death, and experiencing loss as a favour alleviating the pain of premature death<sup>41</sup>.

This eschatological interpretation of the hoop is perennial. It is tempting to interpret as a Christian semantization of a child image or Eros playing with a hoop or wheel on sarcophagi or *loculi* plates. On a *loculus* plaque from the catacomb of Callixtus (fig. 11; 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE)<sup>42</sup>, the hoop-rolling Eros holds a palm branch which is usually interpreted as referring to the agonistic dimension of the game, as on sarcophagi. However, in a funerary context, the devices may represent two symbols of rebirth and eternity, the one pagan, the hoop, the other Christian, the palm. In the modern period, the myth finds a new soothing expression in 17<sup>th</sup> century Netherlands portraits of deceased children as Ganymede<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Lambrugo 2012; Dasen 2018, fig. 5; Dasen 2019b, p. 55, fig. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Vêrilhac 1982, I, n° 198, pp. 280-281 and n° 199, pp. 281-283 on Hellenistic and Roman period funerary inscriptions comparing human children with Ganymede.

<sup>42</sup> Bucolo 2013; Giuliana 2013; Dasen 2018, fig. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Bedaux, Ekkart, 2000, p. 289-291: Nicolaes Maes, Portrait de *George Bredehoff de Vicq en Ganymède*, huile sur toile, 99 x 84,5 cm, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum 1993.250, <https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/232637>. I thank Marie-France Morel for this reference.



Figure 11. Rome, marble plaque of loculus, Catacomb of Callixtus, in situ (3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE). After Bucolo 2013, fig. 3.

## Abbreviations

*CBd*: Campbell Bonner database, Budapest <<http://classics.mfab.hu/talismans/>>

*IPriene*: F. Hiller VON GAERTRINGEN (ed.), *Die Inschriften von Priene*, Berlin, Habelt, 1906.

*Liddell, Scott, Jones*: H.G. LIDDELL, R. SCOTT, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised and augmented throughout by Sir H. Stuart JONES, with the assistance of. Roderick MCKENZIE, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1940.

*LIMC*: *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae*, Zürich/München/Düsseldorf, Artemis & Winkler Verlag, 1981-1999.

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