Comparing play and toys from Greco-Roman antiquity with traditional play and toys from rural North Africa

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Tunisian Sahara 1975
map of the Mediterranean in 218 BC

Archive map

localization of the Amazigh and Ghrib and of Oualata in North Africa and the Sahara

adapted Wikipedia map
Sources of the illustrations

Play and toys from Greco-Roman Antiquity

Archaeological research published in
Ludique ! Jouer dans l’Antiquité (2019)
Les Dossiers d’Archéologie (1992, 168)
Archéothéma, Histoire et archéologie (2013, 31)
Archéologia, (2017, 553; 2018, 571) …

North African and Saharan play and toys

Fieldwork in the Tunisian Sahara (1975-1977)
and in Morocco (1992-)
Analysis of a large collection of toys
from North Africa and the Sahara
at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris
(transferred to the Musée du Quai Branly)
The bibliography referring
to the regions concerned
Little boy brandishing a rattle
Athens, Greece, 5th century BC

A mother recreated two types of the traditional rattle
Anti-Atlas, Morocco, 2018
Articulated terracotta dolls, Greece, late 5th-early 4th century BC
Male dolls
clay soil
Anti-Atlas
2001-2005

Female dolls
clay soil
Anti-Atlas
2007
Dressed Roman doll
Tarragona IIIe-IVe c. AD

Girls’ dolls
Anti-Atlas
2005
2006
2005
Couple in bed  
Anti-Atlas  
2005

Wedding feast play  
Anti-Atlas  
2007
Male doll dressed to dance, Anti-Atlas, 2005  Doll created by a little girl, Anti-Atlas, 2006

Argan nut figurines, Anti-Atlas, 2006
Belghenja to implore for rain, Anti-Atlas, 2007

Belghenja doll of a girl, Anti-Atlas, 2007

Dolls for Ashura, bone frame, Anti-Atlas, 2008
Small houses for the play activities of girls and boys

Regarding the small houses, Horace mentions the play activities of a young child, among others the construction of small houses (Dasen, 2011, p. 53)

Moors, Oualata, the work of a maid, 1936

Wedding feast play, Anti-Atlas, 2002

Small house for doll play etc., High Atlas, 1999
Toys for dinner play in the tomb of the little girl from Eretria (Greece), 330-270 av. J.-C.

More rustic furniture in simple clay is also very common (Durand, 1992, p. 16)
Toys for dinner play of North African girls

Terracotta, Rif, North Morocco, 1908

Ghrib, Tunisian Sahara, 1975

Argan paste, Anti-Atlas, 1980

Moors, Oualata, the work of a maid, 1936

Girls 6 to 8 years old, Anti-Atlas, 2011

Terracotta, Anti-Atlas, 2006
Terracotta animals found in children's graves, Gallo-Roman era

Dove  
Cock  
Dog
Animals in clay soil, Anti-Atlas, 2001-2005

Bird
Fish

Goat
Cow
Sheep

Horse
Dromedary
A two thousand year old Saharan tradition
Three-legged toy animals: archaeological and ethnographic data, 100 BC - 1980

Toy dromedary, Jenné, Niger Delta, Mali
100 BC to 1400, S. & R. McIntosh (1982)

Toy sheep, Niger River, Mali, 1904
Lebeuf et Pâques (1970)

Toy dromedary, Jenné, Niger Delta, Mali

Toy dromedary, Tuareg children
Tombouctou, Niger River, Mali, Gabus (1958)

drawings based on the original drawings of the mentioned authors
Dromedary, horses and oxen made by maids for children of the Moors in Oualata, Mauritania, 1936-1938
The furniture of several Fayoum tombs, kept at the Pétric museum in London, included the doll's wardrobe and various toys, such as a balloon, small weaving instruments or even dishes. Roman Orient, 4th century AD (Behling, 2013, p. 18).
Musical instruments

Reed or split cane cymbal
Ancient Greece

Split palm branch cymbal
Ghrib, Tunisian Sahara, 1975

Cymbals held between thumb and middle finger, Ancient Greece

Cymbals held between thumb and middle finger, Anti-Atlas, 2006
Tambourine, Agrigento, Greece, 350-340 BC

Tambourine, skin membrane bronze discs, Ancient Greece

Tambourine with small discs for girls pottery drum for boys used for the Ashura feast Marrakech, Morocco, 1992
Long flute

Aulos (flute), Attic cut
Ancient Greece, about 490 BC

Grandfather’s long flute,
Moroccan Sahara, 2007
Reed flute

Flute whose reed is entirely put in the mouth, Ancient Greece

Reed flute, Ghrib, Tunisian Sahara, 1975

Reed with cut strip

The reed is put entirely in the mouth, Ghrib, Tunisian Sahara, 1975
String instrument

Pandure with three strings, Ancient Greece
Lotar with three strings, boy 13 years, Pre-Saharan, 2007
Amazigh (Berber) violin, seven year old boy, Anti-Atlas, 2005
Amazigh (Berber) violin, thirteen year old herdsboy, Middle Atlas, 1999
Antique and contemporary wheeled trolley

Boy pushing his trolley with wheels
Athens, Greece, 5th century BC

Boy pushing his trolley with wheels (car)
High Atlas, 1999
Boy pushing his trolley with wheels (truck)
Anti-Atlas, 2006

Girl pulling her trolley with wheels,
Athens, Greece, Vth century BC
A boy runs with a hoop
Athens, Greece, 440-435 BC

Running with a hoop

A boy runs with his hoop while shopping
Anti-Atlas, 2019
Game of the five stones

« Game of the five stones: practiced with five knucklebones (astragals). The goal is to throw them up and receive them back into balance on the back of the hand. » (Vespa M., 2019, p. 126).

Game of the five stones, Anti-Atlas, 2005

Game of the five stones, Anti-Atlas, 2012
Circle game

Game with knucklebones, Greece, 500-475 BC

Game with shells, Anti-Atlas, 2012
Wooden spinning top
Roman times

Spinning top with hole in nut, Anti-Atlas, 2012

Spinning top with hole in nut, Anti-Atlas, 2007

Spinning top of a bottle cap
Kénitra, Morocco, 1994

Spinning top modeled in clay soil
Anti-Atlas, 2008
Women playing spinning tops
Athens, Greece, 5th century BC

Four and a half year old girl is ready to launch her spinning top, Anti-Atlas, 2017
Play marbles

Marble track, Rome, forum temple of Venus and Roma

Marrakech
Morocco, 1992
From traditional ball games to football games without rules

Athens, Greece, 450-400 BC

Ghrib, Tunisian Sahara, 1975

Anti-Atlas, 2006
Ball game with curved sticks
Athens, Greece
500 BC

Curved sticks
North Africa
1930s

Balls
North Arica
1930s
Girl pushed by Eros
Greek, from southern Italy, 360-330 BC

Girl pushed by a boy
Kenitra, Morocco, 1994
Seesaw and double seesaw

Two Erotes on a seesaw
Greek, from southern Italy, early 4th c. BC

Three boys and a girl on a double seesaw
Ghrib, Tunisian Sahara, 1975
Always acrobatics

Greece, late 4th century BC

Anti-Atlas, Morocco, 2006
Board game

Athens, Roman era
1st century AD
Protective amulet

For babies and small children

For the groom and a symbol of loyalty for the bride

Greece, 3rd century BC

Anti-Atlas, 2006

Anti-Atlas, 2007
Conclusion

This PowerPoint shows quite well the similarities between the games and toys of Greco-Roman Antiquity and those of the rural North African and Saharan world.

A remarkable similarity is found between the dolls for feasts and rites (11), the clay animals (15-16), the musical instruments (20-24), the cart (25), the hoop (27), the ball game with curved sticks (34), the swing (35) and the board game (39).

The reed flute of ancient Greece and that of the young ghrib adolescents (23) present an exceptional similarity in the level of the construction of this flute as well as in the way of playing it. However, even in this case it is impossible to choose between two hypotheses: a type of flute transmitted over the centuries or a separate invention. Transmission cannot be excluded because of the relations which existed in Antiquity between the Greco-Roman world and the Amazigh (Berber) world of North Africa. That a similar transmission is possible is proved by the three-legged terracotta animals (17-18) and the ball game with curved sticks (34) that cover more than two millennia.

Several games and toys from the two socio-cultural areas represent behaviors and activities of adult women and men and are linked to domestic, professional, ritual or festive life and the life of animals. Rare are toys and games, such as rattles and skill games, which are based on childish behavior.

However, the comparison of the games and toys of Antiquity with the games and toys of the rural North African and Saharan world is limited by contextual differences.

- Ancient information and objects related to games and toys often come from adults, while those from North Africa and the Sahara often come from children.
- Information on fun in Antiquity comes mainly from the elite, unlike that from North Africa and the Sahara from the working class.
- Toys from Greco-Roman Antiquity found in tombs are almost always made in durable materials and not perishable materials as is very often the case for North African and Saharan toys.

Finally, I think I can emphasize that the analysis of the similarities and differences between the games and toys of these two socio-cultural areas offer new and useful information and perspectives for the study of childhoods, play cultures and respective societies.
Populations concerned

Populations of Greco-Roman Antiquity

- Ancient Greek world from the 5th to the 3rd century BC (Attica, Evia (Euboea), Sicily, southern Italy...)
- Roman Empire from the 3rd to the 4th century AD (Aventicum, Lugdunum, Rome, Tarragona...)

Saharan populations

- Populations of the Niger River region, Mali, between 100 BC and 1980
- The Moors of the city of Oualata, Mauritania, from the 1930s
- The Ghrib of the Tunisian Sahara, a small semi-nomadic population in the 1970s

Moroccan populations

- Amazigh (Berber) population of the Rif, early 1900s
- Amazigh population of the Anti-Atlas, the High Atlas and the Middle Atlas, 1992-2019
- Sedentary population of the Moroccan Sahara, early 2000s
- Population of the cities Essaouira, Kénitra, Marrakech, Midelt, 1992-2008
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Working document
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Acknowledgments

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- Marco Vespa
- Gareth Whittaker
References of the slide images on play and toys in the Greco-Roman Antiquity


6 Articulated terracotta dolls, Greece, late 5th-early 4th century BC, from left to right: (cat. 2), Brussels, Royal Museums of Art and History, inv. A.306; (cat. 127) and (cat. 129), Milan, Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Lombardia, inv. Sambon n.260, St. 1574 and inv. Sambon n. 262, St 1576; (cat. 186), Zurich, Universität Zürich Archäologische Sammlung, inv. 2266 - see Dasen, V. (2019). *Ludique ! Jouer dans l’Antiquité*, Gent, fig. 1-4, p. 40-41.

8 top left: Terracotta reproduction of a Roman ivory doll found in Tarragona in a child's tomb, National Archaeological Museum of Tarragona - see photo URL https://www.facebook.com/museesaintraymond/photos/a.140256209369220/855679801160187/?type=3&theater


15 Terracotta animal figurines (cat. 21, 22, 23, 24, 26), Lyon, Lugdunum-museum and Roman theaters, inv. 0.804.49 (rooster), 0.804.52 (rooster), 0.804.53 (dove), 0.854.54 (hen), 0.804.76 (dog) - see Dasen, V. (2019). *Ludique ! Jouer dans l’Antiquité*, fig. 8, p. 27.


25 left: Attic chous (cat. 122), boy pushing his trolley on wheels, Athens region, second half of the 5th century BC, Milan, Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Lombardia, inv. Sambon n. 27, St 1336 – see Dasen, V. (2019). *Ludique ! Jouer dans l’Antiquité*, Gent, fig. 1, p. 3


References of the slide images on North African and Saharan games and toys

Boubaker Daoumani: slide 28 on the right, 29 on the right, 30 at the top in the middle, 39 at the bottom left and right, 44.

Fatima Id Talb: slide 27 on the right.

Khalija Jariaa: slide 5 on the right, 10 on the top right, 11 on the bottom right, 22 right, 26 left, 31 right, 33 bottom right, 37 right, 38 above right and 38 below right, 49.

D. Ponsard, Musée de l'Homme, Paris: slide 18 at the top left and bottom left

Roos Van Wassenhove: slide 38 at the top left.

The other images were taken by Jean-Pierre Rossie.


Dasen, V. (2018). Hoops and Coming of Age in Greek and Roman Antiquity. 8th International Toy Research Association World Conference, Paris – https://hal-univ-paris13.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02170802


Jean-Pierre Rossie's books, articles and PowerPoints are available on

https://ucp.academia.edu/JeanPierreRossie

Tiznit, at the foot of the Anti-Atlas, 2017