

LOCUS LUDI

The Cultural Fabric of Play and Games in Classical Antiquity

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
Fribourg University, June 22-24, 2021

Toys as Cultural Artefacts in Ancient Greek and Roman Cultures: Anthropological and Material Approaches

Deadline of the Call: March 1, 2020

How to apply: Please send a title, abstract, bio-bibliography

Contact: veronique.dasen@unifr.ch, marco.vespa@unifr.ch

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The international conference *Toys as Cultural Artefacts*, organised by the ERC *Locus ludi* research team, invites experts from different disciplines - anthropologists, archaeologists, philologists, art historians – to share reflections on the cultural notion of toy and playful experience in ancient Greece and Rome in a pluridisciplinary and diachronic perspective.

Linguistic and archaeological researches have elaborated on the continuities as well as on the differences between Antiquity and modern times. The aim is to develop these first observations in order to attempt to define the specificities of ancient playthings. The conference will debate the following questions in a comparative, diachronic and cross disciplinary approach:

Session 1.

What is a “toy”? What do we mean by toy in a post-industrial contemporary society? and how was it defined in the past? Since when and how were playthings associated with a specific age group or gender? Adults have games, but what about toys? Archaeologically, can we define the distinctive features of such object in Classical antiquity (size, material, ergonomics, cheap or costly...)? Semiologically, when did specific terms appear to qualify them, and why? In the Greek lexicon, different words, from *paignion* to *athurma*, refer to playful experiences which could include what we call toys, but the contexts of use are different, such as artistic performances, verbal jokes, as well as erotic discourses. In the Latin vocabulary, only the adjective *ludicrum* may be associated with actions that we could translate, albeit inaccurately, with 'toy'. Archaeologically, how can it be identified?

Session 2

The toy stage in the biography of objects. As Sally Crawford (2009) demonstrated, any object can become a toy in the hands of a child, and it is thus impossible or very difficult to identify it without an archaeological context (cultic, funerary, domestic). Problematic too are terracotta replicas of objects found in tombs or sanctuaries. Why were such replicas of toys made, and can we distinguish the real artefact from its symbolical substitute? Similar reflections apply to miniature objects often

associated with children, but with different functions according to time and space, some clearly distinct from play, as with defunctionalised miniature offerings (see Pallas 2011). Terracotta figurines of animals also belong to that debated category.

Session 3

Cheap or costly toys? self-made by children or caretakers, or products of specialists? More work should be undertaken to identify the making of playthings by children, their caretakers or specialised craftsmen. Did one play with self-made or manufactured artefacts? Written sources describe remarkable playthings that were made by specialists, such as the flying dove of Archytas or luxurious puppets. Some of these costly productions are literary fictions, but few surviving exceptional objects in bronze, amber or other precious material, such as an articulated bronze warrior, testify precious objects imitating what we would call toys. But are these toys?

Session 4

Playful rites or ritual play? How can we account for the complex relationship between playful activities on the one hand and religious and devotional experiences on the other in the ancient world? Apart from the so-called “dolls” are a key feature of sanctuary offerings, other playthings such as knucklebones, balls and spinning-tops were dedicated in sanctuaries, each with varying associations and manipulations to explore. Game and divinatory practices are contiguous, as displayed by dice and knucklebones which belong to objects able to activate divine action.

Session 5

The agency of toys: for the ancients, did toys generate a fictional universe, and did they possess a subjectivity? Toys participate to the construction of social identity. Did they differ according to age groups and gender? Did they promote interaction between children, siblings, or friends, between individuals of different sex or status? Did adults (child-minders or parents, mothers or fathers) play with children, and how? And where, in domestic, public or sacred spaces? On a more general level: did toys transmit cultural values shared by a Mediterranean *koinê*? and can we trace transmissions and transformations in later historical periods?

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