SPÅREN AV DE SMÅ

Arkeologiska perspektiv på barn och barndom
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Toys, Play and Swaddling
Indications of Early Childhood in Ancient Greece

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The article deals with selected archaeological children’s materials from Ancient Greece with special attention to vase iconography, figurines and toys.¹ The selected age groups will primarily be infant and toddler periods (age 0–3 years of age), a rare group represented in archaeology. Generally the article concerns material traces of the two age groups. The first part is focusing on the toddler period and concern issues of enabling and the activating of children. The material related to this period mainly concern toys. Selected rattles and dolls are described and analyzed along with a terracotta figurine showing woman-child-interaction to demonstrate that play was a part of an ancient Greek childhood. Modern play-theories are used on the selected archaeological findings to interpret the use of toys and the role of play. The second part focuses on the youngest children and the ways in which infants movement are being constrained. Were infants wrapped with no chance of free movement or were they allowed to move their arms, legs and heads freely? By looking at selected evidence such as vase – and gravestone iconography, figurines and ancient written sources one might get an understanding how the Greeks nursed infants. The function of swaddling and the surmised implications for the infant, seen by the ancient Greeks as well as from a modern medical and psychological perspective, will be discussed. These two subjects underline the great age variability, status and gender shown in the material evidence from ancient Greece perhaps indicating an awareness of discrete stages of childhood.
Toys and play – evidence, function and meaning

In this section selected toys are first described and thereafter interpretations of function, meaning and importance of play are suggested. Toys indicate that children were allowed to play, and playing is a part of childhood (Montgomery 2009: 140-155). Play also keeps children mentally healthy, the brain develops when children play and playing prepares for adulthood (Sheridan 2001). Together with tools toys are some of the oldest artifacts found in archaeological records some being around 9000 years old (Anatolian origin).

Rattles: Often infants and toddlers are depicted on chous from the classical period. The image of children playing was a favored motif. Whether the images of children playing depict an ideal world or reality is not known. However, the finding of toys connects the material evidence of play to the iconographic representation. An example is figure 1 the image showing a child playing with a rattle. The image may be an ideal picture of a child’s play; however, the findings of numerous similar rattles show that toys were used by children. In addition, it seems hard to understand that adults in ancient Greece purely had invented a toy-playing child without any reference to reality.

Fig. 1. (left) Attic red-figure chous with child on potty stool with rattle.
Fig. 2. (right) Terracotta pig rattle from Cyprus, fourth century B.C.

Figure 1 depicts an infant sitting on a potty stool with a rattle in its hand the arm stretched out in an active pose, gazing at the rattle (or perhaps looking at
an unpainted adult). As seen in figure 1 some rattles had dimensions that made them useable for infants. In ancient Greece terracotta rattles were the favored infant toys. The rattles produced a rattling sound when shaken, a sound that amused infants and was believed to ward off evil spirits. In ancient Sparta it was costume to sacrifice piglets during the Tithenides to protect infants in care, giving the pigs a protective symbolic function (Neils & Oakley 2003: 265). Pigs are also found as feeders.

Also today rattles are favored infant toys that are attuned to the spontaneous motoric movements of the arms. In addition, the rattling sound is developmental important because it stimulates and coordinates vital sensor-motoric faculties (Berk 2009). The pig rattle on figure 2 is made of terracotta and found on Cyprus. The measurements are: H. 7, 7 cm. L. 13, 2 cm. Dia. 5, 9 cm. Numerous findings of similar pig rattles on Cyprus indicate a mass-production centre. This pig’s body and snout are wheel-made, while the ears, spinal ridge, the legs and tail are handmade. The ears and snout have pierced holes to the interior which work as vents during firing. The diagonal stripes on the body indicate hair on the pig. The pig was filled with either dried seeds or small clay pellets to create a rattle sound when shaken. The rattle found on Cyprus is too big and heavy to be used by an infant or smaller child (Neils and Oakley 2003:265), so probably it was used by the caregiver to activate and play with the child. If so, playing with a child indicates a deeper human relation. Toys have a primary function: to be played with. The meanings construction may be that the family or caregivers actually cared about the child. If toys indicate deeper human relations between caregivers and child, then it may tell that some children either had a joyful childhood or were kept busy while the caretakers did chores. Their primary needs were looked after, which is indicated by nursing objects such as feeders and potties. However, they also seem to be activated through play, and interacted with other humans. Activating an infant or young child is very important, and studies from Rumanian orphanages show that children can die and become severely brain damaged if not activated and stimulated (Rutter 2008). The toys indicate that children were both activated and stimulated in ancient Greek society. Playing is, as mentioned before, a part of being a child and having a childhood.

**Dolls:** Dolls from ancient Greece are found from the geometric period to the Hellenistic period. They are found in several places in Greece most often in graves or sanctuaries. The material differs and dolls made of bone, wood, ivory, marble, cloth and alabaster are found, however, terracotta are the most
common material. Several types of dolls have been found, static, jointed and seated dolls. Fig. 3 and 4 are of the jointed-type.

Figure 3 is a Corinthian terracotta doll of the jointed-type from early fifth-century B.C. The doll is female and wears a short chiton with the remains of red paint showing garment decoration. It has long black hair and it measures H. 12, 3 cm. Figure 4 is of Attic origin. The doll is from mid-fourth century and is also of the jointed-type but without clothes. It is made of molded terracotta and the hair is beautifully engraved in the clay according the trend of the period. The doll's dimensions are: H. 15, 3 cm. and W. 5, 25 cm. Most commonly dolls are women, but few male dolls are found. The first dolls were shaped as a bell with only moveable legs; in the sixth century B.C. the dolls get moveable arms, too. The jointed-type appears, and the limbs are attached with strings (Elderkin 1930). Often the dolls have krotala (castanet-like instruments) in their hands placing them in a dance-context (Neils & Oakley
2003:267). In the late fifth-century B.C. the dolls no longer wear clothes (molded terracotta clothes), but are now nude as in figure 4. Perhaps, the dolls were dressed in clothes of real garments that are no longer preserved.

The function of the dolls has been addressed. Dolls were found in sanctuaries indicating a ritual context. Young women sacrificed their dolls to different goddesses the day before their wedding day; an example is the Artemis-sanctuary at Brauron, which also held the arkteia festival (Sourvinou-Inwood 1988). The sacrifice of the dolls is a ritual indicating the young girls’ transition to adulthood. The dolls seemed to have multiple functions (i.e. ritual, apotropaic or play). But were dolls used in play? There’s no specific evidence supporting that, however, gravestones suggest that young females used the doll as a toy.

A close look of the motif in fig. 5 shows presumably an intimate situation, the young woman holding the doll as an infant with a smiling expression. Her head is bending forward towards the doll while gazing giving associations of mother-child-motifs found on classical and Hellenistic steles. If that’s the case, the use of a doll may function as role-play where the young woman identifies with her future caring role as a mother.
Dolls are often found in girl’s graves, whereas in boy’s graves pushcarts and toy rollers are primarily found. As the boy’s were buried with favored male-toys without religious or ritual functions, then it may be the same for girls. Although the dolls may have had a protective value, they were perhaps primarily toys. Some types of dolls may have been votive offerings in sanctuaries; however, the ones found in graves may have been from a domestic context. It’s not known whether dolls in the household were available to girls at all times. But should they be at hand for a child in the role-playing-age (3-6 years of age) the doll may have had the function of experimenting with gender roles, family morals and values.

Fig. 7. The Ampharete stele - Attic gravestone from late fifth century B.C.

Adult-child play: The terracotta figurine (fig. 6) is one out of a series of late archaic Boiotian figurines depicting scenes from domestic life. The illustration in fig. 6 of a woman with a boy riding piggyback on her shoulders is rare. The child’s gender is shown by the red color of the body – a typical gender indication in archaic times. The figurine measures: H. 15, 3 cm and W. 5, 25. The woman with her hands around the feet of the boy prevents him falling backwards. The boy is in a straight-back position with his hands resting on
the woman’s head. The facial expression of the woman indicates a smile and the boy perhaps, too, making impression of a joyful event. Even if it’s not seen on the figurine or the posture of the woman, the piggyback ride is an active play, the adult running and leaping with the child on her shoulders. This specific figurine depicts an intimate moment within a Greek household. (Neils & Oakley 2003:266).

Grave steles from the Classic and Hellenistic period also indicate emotions towards children. The Ampharete stele from Kerameikos in Athens dates to the late fifth century B.C. and shows a grandmother with her grandchild (fig. 7). The inscription clearly states the grandmother’s grief of the death of her grandchild (Neils & Oakley 2003: 3). The child’s arms are stretched out towards a bird the grandmother is holding in her hand while gazing at the child. The stele is important since it indicates that the family was probably not nuclear (mom, dad and child) as in modern Nordic families, but included grandparents as well (and nurses). Recent psychological research of alloparenting shows that children don’t necessarily need only the biological mother or father to thrive as long as they have caregivers that provide them with primary care and affection (Hrdy 2009). Research has shown that infants are capable of developing multiple attachments with other people they are in contact with (Howes & Piker 2008). The modern Nordic idea of the nuclear family as the norm may not be the same as in antiquity, however, that doesn’t necessarily mean that children were not cared for. Today, in some southern and eastern European countries children are looked after by their grandparents or other relatives. Childhood was probably different in ancient Greece because the context was different.

The importance of play: The Greeks had specific words related to play: παιδία (refers to childrens games); δυρμα (refers to silliness and futile play); γών (is used for competitions and games). But play seems to be universal among mammals, and Homo sapiens is not an exception (Sutton-Smith 1977). Play can be practical and imaginary without the use of distinct toys, but toys can also be a simple stick or a stone. When objects are created for the sole use of being played with, for example toy rollers and dolls, the “play-object” changes into a toy (Baxter 2005: 39-57). Toys found in ancient Greece were made by adults for children, and not by children themselves. Perhaps toys were created to make children happy and content? Perhaps adults knew that playing was healthy? Maybe the child was kept busy for the grown-ups to do chores? Toys may have been objects of affection; something adults created to please children. The same is the case for nursing objects; they were created to have a practical function, e.g. feeders to accommodate the child’s primary
need for food. It was in the family’s interest to nourish and feed the child. Some feeders, however, are formed as a pig, a pomegranate or have ornaments on them. Perhaps it was easier to get the child to drink when the feeder was formed as a pig? A more systematic study of feeders might reveal a tendency to form feeders as something fun and relatable like a pig. Perhaps the form had an apotropaic function?

Probably not all children had a playful childhood. Perhaps some children, especially the poor and slave children had a difficult life with labor from an early age thus preventing them from the joy of playing. However, the material evidences show so far that some children did play and were engaged in caregiver-child interactions. The study of children and childhood, play and how children were nursed, raised and cared for in ancient Greece would benefit from more focused attention from researchers (Golden 1990).

Swaddling - evidence, meaning and implications

Swaddling is an old tradition that may be dated to the beginning of the existence of Homo sapiens. Anthropologists suggest that children were swaddled primarily to keep warm. Though, until the 1800s people believed that swaddling increased growth and straightened limbs ensuring a perfect posture. This is today a theory less accepted. However, pediatric studies show that children sleep longer; the REM-sleep is deeper and infants arouse less when swaddled (Franco 2005). The child also cries less when wrapped in clothes, and preterm infants benefit physically when swaddled after birth; they show improved neuromuscular development, less physiological stress, better motor organization, and more self-regulatory ability (van Sleuwen 2007). The tradition may have resulted from the necessity for the child to be dormant in a long period of time. But swaddling also has some serious side effects, probably unknown to prehistoric and antique parents, such as the causing of hyperthermia when misapplied. There is also evidence for higher risks of respiratory infections related to the tightness of swaddling, and wrapping also increase the risk of SID (Sudden Infant Death). Besides the benefits of a silent baby, the tradition may also have another practical function: a swaddled child couldn’t move by itself enabling the caregiver to do chores while still having the baby near without the fear of loosing it (Van Gestel et al. 2002:78-80).

Archaeological evidence: The earliest examples of archaeological evidence of swaddling in Greece dates from geometric period. Terracotta figurines from the geometric period and Aegean bronze age indicate the tradition was in use in prehistoric times since the terracotta figurines show swaddled infants
in the arms of a female caretaker (Neils & Oakley 2003: 31, Cat. 21: 33, Fig. 1: 60, Cat. 23). Ancient written sources suggest that children were swaddled to keep the limbs straight and to ensure correct growth in ancient Greece. Aristotle recommended that the child was to be swaddled as soon as possible after birth to prevent deformations of the baby’s body (Aristotle Hist. An. book VII, part IV). Plato claims that children should be swaddled for two years, and that children should be carried by nurses (caregivers) for three years (Plato Laws 7.789e). A later written source recommends that children are unswaddled after 40 days, depending on their physique (Soranus Gynaecia 2.15). However, ancient writers believed children to be helpless and in need of immediate care to survive the first 40 critical days. This was done by massaging the child and wrapping it in woolen clothes (Dasen 2008: 50). The literary sources may confirm that swaddling was practiced at least in some periods of ancient Greek history. However, what does the material evidence show?

Iconographic evidence such as grave steles show that children are sometimes swaddled; though, the baby’s head is often left free or applied with a small cap, which meant they could move the head freely (Garland 1990: 81-83, fig. 7). When looking at iconography of swaddled infants they’re almost never fully covered, and often even the hands are free to reach out for an adult or a pet. The evidence show that children were probably not left swaddled to the age of two as recommended by Plato. Iconographic evidence of toddlers
often shows that they were allowed to sit on the lap of caregivers, crawl on the floor and interact with other humans, play with rattles and other toys or pets (Cohen & Rutter 2007:45-50). Two pictures on two different vases depict a child on a potty stool; both pictures indicate that the toddler-aged child is allowed to sit in the stool and have free movements of arms, legs and head. The chous from 440-430 B.C. with the child with a rattle sits on such a potty stool (fig. 1). There are two other depictions of a child on a potty stool, which are found on a lekythos and on a kylix from 460 B.C. and both also depict an adult female. On the kylix (fig. 8) the child is reaching for the female adult while twisting in his potty chair and the female reaches back while gazing at the child. The child gazes back and his right foot is outstretched towards the female; the gesture almost says “pick me up”. This depiction may be placed in an intimate mother-child-sphere where the potty training is of affectionate and private character (Neils & Oakley 2003: 241, fig 42). Other scenes indicate that toddlers were free to move around and explore: a red figure pelike on fig. 9 from 430-420 B.C. show two adults with a crawling baby (Neils & Oakley 2003: 237: 37).

One female adult is reaching out for the baby that is crawling towards her both having eye-contact. The male adult is standing in a seemingly encouraging pose leaning forward on his cane. The toddler is in center of the depiction and
the scene is to be put in a private context in the oikos. The female figure may be the mother and the male the father placing the scene in a family context. However, the scene could also be of a pedagogue and a nurse, which still tells that the child was allowed to crawl and seemed to have intimate relations to its caregivers. A scene of another crawling toddler (fig. 10) is depicted on a chous from 420 B.C. (Neils & Oakley 2003: 285, fig. 96).

The chubby toddler is crawling towards a chous on the ground in front of him. This is a classic scene on Attic chous where toddlers are often shown crawling on all fours towards an object of interest such as a bird or a pet. However, it’s not only in the classic period that we see crawling babies; a Late Minoan bronze figurine of a crawling infant was found in the Dictaean Cave on Crete. The bronze figurine is amazingly naturalistic considering the time it was made; the infant is shown crawling with its head raised and a smile upon its face (Neils & Oakley 2003: 237, fig. 38). The babies depicted on Attic vases are in exactly the same pose as the figurine showing that crawling was a well-known act of infants. Other depictions show that children were allowed to move freely and engaged in human interactions. A grave stele from 420-410 B.C. shows a maid passing a twisting baby with out-stretched arms to the mother. The mother is lifting her arms to take the baby while gazing at her child (Neils & Oakley 2003: 133, fig. 25).

Women are shown on grave steles with children. The child is either on her lap (Ampharete), being passed on by a maid or the child stands by her feet reaching for a bird. The scenes are often marked by intimacy between the woman and the child, for example mutual eye-contact and close body contact. The child can be a symbol of fertility, though; the scenes may also show that the deceased mother was a good caretaker of the child. In fig. 11, a figurine from the Hellenistic period, 330-310 B.C. shows a seated infant girl with outstretched arms (Neils & Oakley 2003: 239, fig 40). The chubby toddler is posed with arms stretching up towards an adult, left leg bent up and head looking up. This pose is typical for a toddler not yet able to walk but who wants immediate care from an adult. Other sculptures have been found with toddlers in the same pose (Neils & Oakley 2003: 239).

Material evidence indicates that children were perhaps not restrained in toddler age, and in the later stage of infancy. Premature children and newborn infants were perhaps swaddled in the first 40 weeks of their life; yet the iconographic evidences of swaddled babies are not more frequent than the unswaddled, and none registered depicts swaddled toddlers. The material evidence may show that older infants, toddlers and children were allowed to move freely; they were allowed to use their arms, legs and move their heads.
with no restraintment; they were using rattles, sitting and wriggling on potty stools, and crawling exploring the household. The evidence may also indicate intimate relations through potty-training, play, crawling exercise and intimate interactions such as sitting on the lab and playing with pets with caregivers.

When infants are portrayed as swaddled in iconography they’re often not older than 6 months. Older infants are half-swaddled sometimes in the headscarf of the mother or nurse. Toddlers are almost never swaddled, and are often portrayed in active poses such as crawling or playing. Swaddling can therefore be seen as an age-indicator of the child depicted on the stele or vase. The iconography is not in correspondence with Plato’s ideas of child-stages in ancient Greece. The iconographic evidence indicates that children were not swaddled until the age of 2, and not carried to the age of 3.

Functions and implications: Swaddling is a practice that went out of fashion in the 1800s, but it is used to some extend today, even in a country like the USA. The tradition was probably performed in ancient Greece, however perhaps only on infants. The reason for using the practice in ancient Greece may be pure tradition; though, there are some general benefits to the practice that may tell us why it was done. A later written source tells that “swaddling transforms a small shrunken animal into a human and helps it grow as straight as possible”, which once again indicate the physical aspect of swaddling, but also a symbolic function (Plutarch *Moralia*). The infant was distinguished from an animal by swaddling. Infants were in general viewed as something inhuman the first weeks of life and it was even mentioned to be “plant-like” (Plutarch *Moralia*, 288C; Dasen 2008:50). Swaddling may have been a way to humanize infants, and to separate them from animals and plants, thus, when they were old enough and part of the family they didn’t need to be swaddled any longer. They were now seen as members of the family. However, iconographic evidence show sentiments towards swaddled infants e.g. on grave steles and votive terracotta figurines. The view on infants as being animals or plants may be purely a male opinion, since the sentimental scenes of swaddled babies and adults are always of a woman and child.

The argumentation of physical benefits of swaddling is mentioned in several antique primary sources. However, as mention before there’s no evidence that swaddling improves the growth and straightens the limbs. One reason for swaddling infants may also be the benefit of a deeper sleep, less arousal and therefore a quieter child. The caregivers should only feed and pamper the child the first 2 months, and could still do other chores. It may have been easier with a swaddled infant than an unswaddled active squirming baby. However, the risks were also there, and perhaps antique caregivers knew that infants should
not be restrained too long and too hard. Relatively many children died during the first 6 months, and perhaps swaddling was related to early infancy death. The antique parents obviously didn't know of the risk of SID, hyperthermia and respiratory illness affiliated with swaddling. Functionally, swaddling were probably practices for various reasons such as physical enhancement, the benefits of an easier and quieter child and tradition. However, material evidence indicates that only younger infants were swaddled while older infants and toddlers were allowed to crawl, play and interact with other humans. The material also points out that there were caregiver-child-relations through different interaction-episodes such a potty-training and play. Young children in ancient Greece may have had a relative stable and safe environment to grow up where exploration was permitted and encouraged.

Conclusion

The Material evidence in the article and the relatively large numbers of toys found in Greece indicate that children played in ancient Greece. Some types of toys and a figurine show that children were also played with by caregivers. The ancient Greek child was surrounded by multiple caregivers such as (wet)-nurses, pedagogues and slaves acting as primary caregivers. The biological parents were not the only ones to create a stabile and safe environment in the household as long as the child were nurtured and nursed by other caring primary caregivers (allo-parenting).

Different types of toys had different functions; rattles were used by infants indirectly (and probably unknowingly) stimulating the senso-motoric development. Dolls (probably mostly used by girls) were perhaps used as a part of a role play preparing the girl for the future role as a mother. Further studies of ancient Greek toys are necessary to conclude more specific about play and role play in ancient Greece. Though, the evidence indicates that children did play and were played with in ancient Greek society, which show that some children had a playful childhood with both physical and mental development as consequences. However, some evidence also indicates restraintment of the youngest infants. It appears that swaddling was practiced to some extend in ancient Greece, thus the materiel evidence does not correspond with the primary written sources stating that children were swaddled to the age of two. Grave stele iconography shows that only the youngest infants were swaddled (0-6 moths, max. 1 year). Though, the swaddling seen on steles can perhaps also be interpreted as an age-indicator, since after age one the child is only swaddled in loose clothing (e.g. on Ampharete stele). However, the practice of swaddling has probably been used to some degree in ancient Greek society.
The tradition was probably practiced because it was believed to enhance the physical benefits of the child straightening the limbs making the child longer and stronger. Modern research shows that swaddled children arouse less when sleeping, which can also have been a (practical) factor.

However, older infants were not restrained by full-body swaddling, but only wrapped in loose clothing enabling to move their hands and head freely. Pictures on choes also show that toddlers were allowed to crawl, explore their surroundings and play with toys such as rattles. Older children played with dolls, pushed carts and played piggyback interacting with adults (caregivers). Therefore it seems reasonable to conclude that children were encouraged to play and move freely after the first six months of restraint caused by the tradition of swaddling.

Fotnotes
1. The only preliminary cataloguing of specific ancient Greek children’s material is found in the exhibition publication Neils & Oakley, (eds.) (2003) “Coming of Age in Ancient Greece – Images of Childhood from the Classical Past”. This book will be the main archaeological reference in this article. All figures in the article are drawn from this publication.

2. Further research on children in ancient Greece (with focus on the concept of childhood: play, care giving, variability, status and gender shown in the material and literary evidence) will continue with the interdisciplinary project “Being a Child in Ancient Greece – Archaeological and Psychological Perspectives” if a PhD is obtained. The conclusion in this article will therefore not be a definite answer to the addressed issues.

References


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Primary sources


