
Toys in the Ancient Western World

by

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The paper confined itself to archaeological evidence of toys of children in the ancient western world. The research was limited to the Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Hittite, Egyptian, Minoan, Mycenaean, Greek, Etruscan and Roman civilizations, a time period roughly encompassing 4000 B.C. to 600 A.D. This was not meant to infer that toys appeared for the first time in these civilizations and in this time period. Two other limitations were obvious in the study. First, that toys made of certain materials, unless the circumstances were exceptional, have not survived. Toys made of such materials as cloth and wood, for example, have, generally speaking, not survived, whereas pottery and metal artifacts have survived in greater abundance. Secondly, occasionally objects identified as toys might, in actuality, have been religious and cult objects.

Visitations were made to the major museums and sites of these civilizations, and

literary evidence, where available, was analyzed as well. A model developed by Reichardt was utilized in analyzing the evidence. The categorizations were: sound toys, theatrical toys, outdoor toys, simple-movement toys, dolls and doll houses, toy soldiery and toy animals. Examples of each were cited in the study, and slides were shown where available. The types of toys not evidenced in the ancient western world from the Reichardt model were optical or philosophical toys, gravity-operated toys and mechanical toys.

It is difficult to generalize considering the sparsity of the evidence, but objects that were actual ritual objects rather than toys appeared to diminish in the Greek and Roman civilizations, and in some ways the toys mirrored the particular culture. The evidence of toy chariots in Sumer, Greek toys which required considerable skill and dexterity, all show a tendency for toys to mirror the culture. Even if this viewpoint cannot be proven because of the paucity of evidence, what is clear is that childhood, in Greece and Rome had “. . . its own stream of vitality . . . we have ample evidence that children at this period had their own games and their own culture and were allowed their own diversions.” In conclusion, studies on toys have been neglected by physical educators, and provide an important link in the total understanding of the play of a people.