



Adults' games, children's games and toys in the plays of Aristophanes

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This ongoing study sets out to analyze the plays of Aristophanes for what they can tell us of games and game-like activities in V century B.C. Athens. Though simple and practically costless, children's games were present in considerable variety: they involved playing with household utensils (saucepans) or nuts or pebbles or beads, spinning-tops and balls made of strips of leather wound round a straw or horsehair core.

Today's children often play at home (ours is the age of the Game Boy, of play stations, of the McDonald's "happy meal"); for the ancient Greek child, by contrast, Spring, when the apple blossom was out, was a time for the "May-bug game", for hunting partridge and quail nestlings in order to keep them as playthings in little cages, for nursery rhymes to celebrate the arrival of the swallow in Spring.

They had remarkable DIY skills too and would make little houses from clay or wax and carve boats and carts in wood; by imitating more "serious" activities, games helped to prepare children for adulthood, an anticipation of the "professional" future of the younger members of society.

Adults also liked to be involved in the games played out in the ideal frame of the symposium. The most popular of the social games – a combination of the competitive and the erotic – was *cottabo*, which was associated with wine and involved flicking the dregs in a drinking cup at a target (little saucers floating in a basin of water or a disk balanced on a pole). Another pastime, much appreciated in the context of the symposium, was the cryptic use of language, involving the devising and deciphering of riddles, which often had a socio-political slant with allusions to well-known and easily recognizable personalities.