

## THE DEVELOPMENT AND ESTABLISHMENT OF BALL GAMES IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

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### Abstract

The article deals with the data concerning the genesis, establishment and development of ball games in Ancient Greece and Rome. Their essence and social functions have been defined. The consecrated and ceremonial character of ball games peculiar to ancient civilizations has been emphasized (a ball as a sacred item created by gods impersonated the Sun, the Moon and the Earth). In the classical antiquity a ball was both the acquisition of gods and the point of all the social spheres. It was treated as a toy for children, a means of physical education and training, an effective way to revitalize the human body in health-related and free-time activities. Thus, ball games have been proved to execute significant social functions. **The aim of the research** is to outline the role of ball games for the citizenry of Ancient Greece and Rome, to characterize the essence and functions of ball games. **The tasks of the research** are to investigate and analyze artifacts that are connected with ball games of the Classical Antiquity in a direct or roundabout way and to reveal the consistent patterns of their development and establishment in all life spheres. **The content** is provided with archaeological, ethnographic and literary data and items of fine arts, whereas **the research methods** comprise the analysis and summarizing of historic data, defining historical analogy, contrasting and comparing. The research results have enabled the following **conclusions**. Ball games were treated as a vital phenomenon in the Classical Antiquity and left a legacy for the common humanity heritage and physical education alike. A ball and ball games can be accentuated as both a social phenomenon evolving constantly and one of the favourite entertaining kinds of ancient Greeks and Romans.

**Key words:** ball games, Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome.

**Геннадій Петренко. Розвиток й становлення ігор фз м'ячем в античному світі.** У статті проаналізовано й узагальнено дані виникнення, становлення й розвитку ігор із м'ячем в Античних Греції та Римі. Охарактеризовано їхній зміст і соціальні функції. У цивілізаціях Стародавнього світу ігри з м'ячем мали сакральний та ритуальний характер (м'яч уособлював у собі сонце, місяць, землю – священний предмет, який створили боги). В античні часи м'яч став не лише надбанням богів, а поступово поширився в різні сфери життя населення Стародавнього світу: як дитяча іграшка; як засіб у фізичному вихованні, фізичній підготовці спортсменів; як ефективний засіб оздоровчого впливу на організм людини в оздоровчо-профілактичній діяльності, у дозвіллі. Тобто вправи та ігри з м'ячем виконували важливі соціальні функції. **Мета дослідження** – визначити місце ігор із м'ячем у житті населення Стародавніх Греції й Риму, дати характеристику їх змісту та функцій. **Завдання дослідження** – дослідити та проаналізувати артефакти, безпосередньо або опосередковано, пов'язані з іграми в м'яч в античному світі. Виявити закономірності розвитку й становлення ігор з м'ячем в усіх аспектах життя людства в Стародавніх Греції й Римі. **Матеріали та методи дослідження.** Джерельну базу дослідження становлять археологічні, етнографічні, літературні дані та предмети образотворчого мистецтва. У роботі використовували такі **методи:** аналіз й узагальнення історичних даних, проведення історичної аналогії, зіставлення й порівняння. За результатами дослідження можна зробити такі **висновки.** Ігри з м'ячем були значним явищем у житті народів Стародавніх Греції й Риму та залишили спадщину як у загальну культуру людства, так і у фізичну культуру зокрема. Можна з упевненістю стверджувати, що м'яч і пов'язані з ним ігри – соціальний феномен, який постійно еволюціонує, був одним з улюблених видів дозвілля стародавніх греків і римлян.

**Ключові слова:** ігри з м'ячем, Стародавня Греція, Стародавній Рим.

**Геннадий Петренко. Развитие и становление игр с мячом в античном мире.** В статье проанализированы и обобщены данные возникновения, становления и развития игр с мячом в античных Греции и Риме. Охарактеризованы их содержание и социальные функции. В цивилизациях Древнего мира игры с мячом имели сакральные и ритуальные характер (мяч олицетворял в себе солнце, месяц, землю – священный предмет, который создали боги). В античные времена мяч стал не только достоянием богов, а постепенно распространился в различные сферы жизни населения Древнего мира: как детская игрушка; как средство в воспитании, физической подготовки спортсменов; как эффективное средство оздоровительного воздействия на организм человека в оздоровительно-профилактической деятельности, в досуге. То есть упражнения и игры с мячом выполняли важные функции. **Цель исследования** – определить значение игр с мячом в жизни населения Древней Греции и Рима, дать характеристику их содержания и функциям. **Задачи исследования** – исследовать и проанализировать артефакты, непосредственно или косвенно связанные с играми в мяч в античном мире. Вывести закономерности развития и становления игр с мячом во всех аспектах жизни человечества в Древней Греции и Риме. **Материалы и методы исследования.** Базу исследования составляют археологические, этнографические, литературные данные и предметы изобразительного искусства. В работе использовались следующие методы: анализ и обобщение исторических

данных, проведение исторической аналогии, сопоставления и сравнения. По результатам исследования можно сделать следующие **выводы**. Игры с мячом были значительным явлением в жизни народов Древней Греции и Рима и оставили наследство как в общей культуре человечества, так и в физической культуре в частности. Можно с уверенностью утверждать, что мяч и связанные с ним игры – социальный феномен, который постоянно эволюционирует, был одной из любимых видов досуга древних греков и римлян.

**Ключевые слова:** игры с мячом, Древняя Греция, Древний Рим.

**Introduction.** Every nation has its own psychophysical system which is based on the unique traditions, mentality and mode of life. Such a system indicates its common cultural level and the stage of national evolution. A range of movements and organizations to learn and expand traditional games and activities has been formed. While popularizing national games and sport they can gain their international status and give a common ground to different cultures [11].

The activity of playing a ball has accompanied the humanity for centuries. It results in the cultural similarity and diversity. Since the time of consecrated games in Ancient Egypt ball games have become an integral part of the humanity.

Taking into account the data provided by *the Association For International Sport for All* (TAFISA), that represents the constant working party «*Sport for All*» of the International Olympic Committee at 20th World Congress TAFISA in Buenos Aires, 36,5 % of general public engage in sport activities with balls. The association also informed about 20 most popular kinds of sport (in 200 countries) in percentage terms.

The number of the adherers following these kinds of sport is even more striking. The supporters in sport are not passive observers; they are participants or a vital component that guarantees sport functioning at the interpersonal and social levels. The results of polling show that a number of ball games' supporters (soccer, football, basketball, baseball, volleyball, cricket, tennis, golf, handball, ping pong, rugby, lawn hockey, billiards, bowling, etc.) exceed half the world population in different countries. Therefore, the development and formation of physical education and sport activities cannot exist without ball games.

It is difficult to define where and when exactly a ball was created. The balls made of different materials have been excavated on all continents. There are some Egyptian fresco paintings that depict playing and juggling a ball. Excavating shrines revealed the balls stuffed with papyrus or palm timber and covered with leather or fabric.

Social ball games were rather popular in Ancient Egypt and the victories were dedicated to the gods. The aboriginals of North America treated a ball as a sacred object but not a toy; a ball was forbidden to touch because it impersonated the Sun, the Moon and the Earth. A light jumpy rubber ball familiar to us was invented 3000 years ago by the Olmecs populating the territory of present-day Mexico. And the air filler instead of feathers and wool was implemented in China.

The uprise of any idea is always historically predetermined and caused by a set of subjective and objective reasons. The competitions for agonists were originally peculiar to Greeks [10]. A ball in ancient Greece was both a game and an oblation to honour gods who were supposed to invent a ball treated as an ideal item. The Romans borrowed and improved many games of the Ancient Greeks. Some of these games have been preserved till nowadays. A great many artifacts concerning balls were connected with the Classical Antiquity and serve as a proof of appreciating ball games in the ancient society.

The availability of censorious ancient literature, the profound knowledge of ancient religion, the artifacts comprising decorated vases, sculptures and other household goods dating from the epochs of Ancient Greece and Rome means that we have at our disposal objective data reflecting the erstwhile mentality, worldviews, the perception of events and activities [10].

A ball is a handy and dynamic toy that has ever taken a specific social place. Ball games used to be vital for health, emotional adequacy, physical and mental development of the Ancient Greeks and Romans. Arguing the ball games' origins, the stages of their development and different strata's attitude to playing a ball in the Classical Antiquity has ever been challenging and encouraged the present research.

**The aim of the research** is to identify the role of ball games, to outline their influence on the life in Ancient Greece and Rome and characterize their essence and functions.

**The tasks of the research** are to investigate and analyze artifacts that are connected with ball games of the Classical Antiquity in a direct or roundabout way and to reveal the consistent patterns of their development and establishment in all life spheres.

**The Content and the Research Methods.** The content is provided with archaeological, ethnographic and literary data and items of fine arts, whereas the research methods comprise the analysis and summarizing of historic data, defining historical analogy, contrasting and comparing.

**The Research Results and their Arguing.** The mythology of Ancient Greece has preserved the names of many gods and heroes. The sanctuaries, temples, shrines and altars were built, the statues were constructed, the sacrifices were offered up and the inscriptions were dedicated in order to honour gods. Still, we possess the limited data about ball games owing to the fact that at that time they were not a part of the Olympic Games and other consecrated and ceremonial sport events in honour of gods.

The antiquity appreciated mental maturity and physical efficiency alike. Thus, the Greeks spent their free time in palaestrae [3] and gymnasiums. An ephebeion was the largest facility for physical drills and games. The gymnasiums also had such sport grounds as a sphaisterion (for playing a ball) and a drome (for running).

Though ball games stood first among all sport activities in Ancient Greece, none of them either was played outside an educational institution or reached competitive level called «agon». A ball game was associated with physical education and training only. Thus, it did not come up with such classical sport activities as running, jumping, the javelin and discus throwing, wrestling that were included into the renowned Olympic Games. Playing a ball was treated as a kind of fundamental gymnastics and could only assist in gaining physical efficiency. Amid the patrician atmosphere of the Olympics sphaisteria were noted for democratic ball games that required no equipment and thus were affordable for all ages. However, in order to ensure the observance of rules the presence of a coach called a sphaistic was obligatory. The balls were made of wool and feathers and covered with leather. There were also heavy balls stuffed with sand and light balls for kids filled with air [2].

The first mentions about ball games in ancient times were found in Homer's poems. The initial descriptions were recorded in «Odyssey». In one case («Odyssey», VI, 100, 115) it goes about a game called «feninda» or «efetinda», based on the deceit of a partner: a player aims for another player and then throws a ball in the opposite direction; that's why every participant should be wide awake not to lose a ball. Another fragment describes the game called «Urania»: a ball is tossed high up and another player should jump and catch it on the fly [2]:

*So taking in hand a gleaming sea-blue ball,  
made by the craftsman Polybus – arching back,  
one prince would hurl it toward the shadowy clouds  
as the other leaping high into the air would catch it  
quickly, nimbly, before his feet hit ground again («Odyssey», VII, p. 372–376).*

Homer described that dances were either executed by acrobats or stepped with the help of a ball. Agallida, a woman from Corcore wanted to please her fellow-countrywoman and thus informed that Nausicaa was supposed to invent a ball game. But Dicaearchus claimed that Sicyon was an inventor, while Hippasus mentioned the Lacedaemonians, the forefathers of all gymnastic activities. Nausicaa was the only heroine who was depicted playing a ball, whereas the most famous ball players were Demoten, Theocritus [or Theognis], a sophist from Chios and some Herephan. Even Ctesibium, a philosopher from Chalcis liked ball games and numerous friends of King Antigonos competed with him. However, a kind of a ball called phollicle was invented by a gymnastics trainer, Atticus from Naples, in order Pompeii the Great could engage in training. A game itself was originally named feninda and later it became known as robbing and appealed greatly to ancient people. It demanded expanding great efforts when struggling for a ball and consequently was supposed to be rather exhausting. Antiphany admitted: «*Oh-Oh! How painful! My neck is aching!*» [1].

The ancient records concerning the life and oeuvre of Sophocles, who was a tragedian, a play-writer and one of the most prominent tragic poets in Greece of the Classical Antiquity describe his skills in playing a ball. Similar to the music ingenuity Sophocles' physical skills that were the result of his studying at Athenian palaestrae stood him in good stead in the dramatic art. His early tragedies also comprised «Nausicaa» that celebrated the charming idea of Homer's «Odyssey» (Book VI). A tired hero was sleeping when Nausicaa and her friends were playing a ball after laundering. Nausicaa wanted to point a ball at her servant but it fell into the sea. The girls screamed and Odysseus woke up.

Sophocles impersonated Nausicaa and put a play on the stage impressing everybody with his skills in playing a ball [9]. When staging «Phamira» Sophocles played the cithara himself. He was also good at playing a ball after representing Nausicaa [2, p. 28]. Sophocles attracted the audience's attention with both playing a ball and singing (the fact was documented in the commentaries to «Odyssey») [3, p. 29].

Soon the interest in ball games spread. We admit that all Lacedaemonians, Alexander the Great and Sophocles (who became famous starring as Nausicaa that played a ball in his drama «Nausicaa or Laundrywomen») were involved with the ball games [5].

In general, all artifacts can describe ancient customs better than literary writings, though they presuppose the involvement of the imagination and guesswork. For instance, there exists a painted vase dating from VI century BC and representing an interesting scene: the participants of a game carry three youngsters on their shoulders whereas an adult (he is evidently a coach) preceding the procession holds a ball high overhead. The painted vase is assumed to depict a game ending. Evidently, the losers were to carry the winners on their shoulders. Such an interpretation is based on the real runners' tradition that existed in Classical Antiquity. Due to that tradition a loser called «a donkey» was to carry a winner honorary called «a king» on the shoulders [2].

The sculpture «A Game» dating from IV century BC reflects a game that resembles the previous image on the vase (VI century BC). Despite of its poor condition, this ancient sculpture witnesses its creator's elaborate ingenuity because it precisely represents the dynamics and clothing. Still, it is necessary to perceive the composition's oddity: a girl is carrying another girl on her shoulders. It has turned out that there are a lot of sculptures dating from the antiquity that look similar to the sculpture «A Game» Since mid-XIX century and up to the present the diggings have revealed 40 analogous compositions. The analogue of a Capitoline one (a terracotta sculpture) is exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It has been preserved better and helps perceive the plot representing a game called «ephedrism». The essence of the game was to knock a ball out of the field throwing stones at it. The activity was especially popular among females and the one who managed to aim for a ball became a winner. It used to be a pair game and the losers were to carry the winners on their shoulders. The moment of admitting defeat was often depicted by artists.

There were other kinds of ball games comprising catching a ball jumping off the ground and juggling several balls in the meantime. The Greeks considered those activities to favour stamina and be recreational alike. Ball games played a special role in Ancient Sparta because alongside with other physical activities playing a ball game was treated seriously and considered to be a preparatory stage for military service. For instance, an ephibium of the first year of studies was called a spherist because they practiced ball games a lot. The competitions between teams playing a ball were often held in Ancient Sparta. They were treated not only as an entertaining activity but as serious contests demanding thorough preparation and training as well. The winners of team competitions in ball games were honoured just the same as if they had been Olympic champions [2]. An example of such a game was episkyros involving two teams. Each team comprised 12 or 14 players and the contests were held during an annual town festival. Usually, five teams participated in the playing session. Though it was only a ball game, it used to be rather fierce, especially in Sparta [12]. The role of spheristics at the times of Ancient Sparta is supposed to be essential due to the fact that the name of Timothrit from Sparta who created a manual concerning the ball game's rules has been preserved till nowadays [2].

There was another game called «trigon» meaning a triangle: every participant of which was to catch a ball with a hand, throw it to another hand and send a ball to some contestant. The marble statue showing a boy playing trigon was found by George McFadden while carrying out digs in the Temple of Apollo Khilats on Cyprus. The statue represents the boy keeping balls in both hands and is exhibited in the Archaeological Museum of Kurion in Lymassol, Cyprus.

Another team game was called «harpastum» and involved two teams who tried to take away a ball pushing away their rivals. The game was a competitive one and required agility, strength and quick orientation in mid-air. It is clear that the rules were to be strictly observed. The sculptures often represent the images of the game resembling modern ball hockey and the participants rolling a ball with bent sticks [2].

The marble relief from the National Archaeological Museum in Athens shows a Greek athlete balancing a ball on the hip, presumably demonstrating the technique of teaching the boy. The ball, obviously, is a folio – an inflated ball. The game was popular, but the Greeks did not leave us any descriptions.

Commending a ball as one of the first ancient toys of man and the best gift for children, Aristotle says: «... the most beautiful ball or lekif, of course, has splendor as a gift to a child ...» (Book 4, XV, Article 129). «Argonautica» by Apollonius Rhodius, the only monument of epic Hellenistic poetry of the time of its heyday, not only fully came to us, but is also preserved in many manuscripts. In the poetry we find the lines in which the goddess of Cyprus offers her son Eros a ball (the desired toy) for fulfilling her request:

*Come, be ready to perform for me the task I will tell thee of,  
and I will give thee Zeus' all-beauteous plaything –  
the one which his dear nurse Adrasteia made for him,  
while he still lived a child, with childish ways, in the Idaean cave –*

*a well-rounded ball; no better toy wilt thou get from the hands of Hephaestus.  
All of gold are its zones, and round each double seams run in a circle;  
but the stitches are hidden, and a dark blue spiral overlays them all.  
But if thou shouldst cast it with thy hands, lo, like a star,  
it sends a flaming track through the sky.* (Book 3, p. 130–135).

This episode from «Argonautica» is depicted on a lekythos («Eros with a Ball», IV century BC, National Museum, Warsaw).

The Romans, both adults and young people, played ball games even more willingly than the Greeks. The Romans spent their leisure time in baths. The bath complexes were intended not only for bathing, there were sports grounds there. However, in contrast to the Greek palaestra and gymnasiums, the Roman baths were primarily a place for relaxation, and not the place for physical training of warriors, sports grounds had only auxiliary functions.

One of the favorite ball games that the Romans played in the bathhouses was trigon in which players passed a ball back and forth as quickly as they could. Probably in the game, besides ordinary balls, glass balls were used. One of those balls is preserved at the Dusseldorf Museum. Confirmation of the existence of glass balls games we find in the epitaph of the second century AD: «*Ursus, who was the first Roman to play with a glass ball properly with my fellow-players, while the people approved with greatest applause, in the baths of Trajan, in the baths of Agrippa and Titus, and frequently in Nero's (if only you believe me) – am I.*» Juggling balls, like games for the Greeks, was a fun for the Romans, as evidenced by vase painting of that time, namely the vase depicting a «Seated Girl Juggling» displayed in the Regional Archaeological Museum in Palermo.

The Romans loved all kinds of tough games. That's why this passion has moved to ball games. Harpastum (Greek harpaston) was just such a game that spread to all Roman provinces. Confirmation of this is an archaeological find in Egypt – a harpastum ball (The British Museum, London). Horace, a poet of the «golden age» of the Roman literature, played ball games. Describing how he, together with Virgil, Varius and others, accompanied Maecenas to the city of Brundisium, says that Maecenas went to play a ball game, but the poet did not participate in the game because his eyes hurt [4]:

*Then to Capua, where the mules shed their loads early.  
Maecenas is off for sport, Virgil and I for sleep:  
Those ball-games are bad for sore eyes and stomachs* (The Satires, I, 5).

But in his another satire, he tells a reader how he was envied when he played with Maecenas or watched the game with him: «*... If he's watched the Games with me Or played ball on the Campus, all cry: «Fortune's child!»*» (The Satires, II, 6).

The rules of the ball games were in Rome, quite likely, the same as they were in Greece, and the Romans considered the game itself as a means of supporting themselves in a proper physical form [2]. Horace in his poems (The art of Poetry, to the Pisos, 380–381) paid tribute to the physical training of athletes and exercises with a ball which were regarded as a means of physical training along with other sports disciplines:

*«He who knows nothing of sport shuns the Campus' gear,  
Watches, if he's unskilled with ball, hoop, or quoit,  
Lest the ring of spectators burst out laughing freely...»*

Martial is one of the most prominent epigrammatists not only in the Roman but also in world literature, in his brief, witty, and humorous epigrams, he pays attention to ball games [7, 8]:

*How sweetly you sing, and how sweetly you dance!  
In touching the lyre, or the ball, how you prance!  
When nought you do well, and yet sweetly do all;  
A sweet goodfornothing such bustler I call* (Book II, 7).  
*Whether you are rubbing into your skin the clammy wrestler's oil,  
or playing at tennis to warm you,  
whether you are catching the dusty ball with your hand,  
or sharing with your competitors  
the featherlike weight of the loose bladder* (Book IV. 19).

Martial was the first to describe balls for various games in his book «The Presents Made to Guests at Feasts» [7]:

*This ball, stuffed with feathers, difficult to manage,  
is not so soft as a bladder, nor so hard as an ordinary ball.  
If you are skilful enough to strike me with rapid left-hand blows,  
I am yours. You are not sufficiently skilled, so, clown, return the ball.  
Retire to a distance, young men; tender age suits me;  
with the bladder it befits only boys and old men to play.  
This the agile youth catches amid the dust of Antaeus (Book XIV, p. 45–48).*

Some works mention that a ball was used by elderly people in physical therapy.

Thus, in the Letters of Pliny the Younger (Book III, 1) there is a description of the way Vestricius Spurinna, a Roman senator, spends his leisure time: «Then he plays at ball for a long spell, throwing himself heartily into the game, for it is by means of this kind of active exercise that he battles with old age.»

Conversely, in Cicero's treatises (Philosophical Treatises on Old Age (Cato the Elder), ball games are considered unsuitable for elderly people: «Let others, then, have their weapons, their horses and their spears, their fencing-foils, and games of ball...» (XV, p. 58).

In ancient Rome games were more than just entertainment. Claudius Galen, a prominent Greek physician, prescribed ball games for his patients instead of drugs, he preferred active games and exercises in the fresh air: «Thousands and thousands of times I was returning health to their patients through exercise».

Galen's favorite exercises comprised games in which a small ball was used. His views concerning a small ball were as follows: «The form of exercise deserving our attention is therefore that which has the capacity to provide health of the body, harmony of the part, and virtue in the soul, and these things are true of the exercise with the small ball». According to Galen, ball games can develop high-level properties of soul and body that people try hard to achieve.

**Conclusions and Perspectives for Further Research.** The developed nations knew only simple types of ball games, but they felt the need for practicing more complex and aesthetic forms of play.

Ball games were a significant phenomenon in the lives of the people of ancient Greece and Rome and they contributed to the general culture of mankind, and physical culture in particular. It can be said with confidence that a ball and ball games as a constantly evolving social phenomenon were one of the favourite pastimes of the ancient Greeks and Romans as well as a form of their physical training.

Prospects for further research will be related to a more detailed study of the development and formation of ball games in the Ancient World.

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