

A Turning World. New Insights into the Burial Practices of Early Iron Age Athens

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This poster is the result of a fruitful collaboration between the LALLACT Project (prof. Claudia Lambrugo, *Lexicon of Ancient Ludonics. Ludic Activities and Cultural Tradition*, based in Milan, University "La Statale", Italy) and the ERC Advanced Grant 2017-2022/23 *Locus Ludi: The Cultural Fabric of Play and Games in Classical Antiquity* (prof. Véronique Dasen, Université de Fribourg, Switzerland), both aiming to understand the educational, societal and integrative role of play in the past and to reconstruct ludic culture as mirror of interaction between different societies.

Starting from a re-examination of toys in grave assemblages, a special attention has been paid to the **spinning top** (Lambrugo, forthcoming). The spinning top (στρόμβος, στρόβιλος, βέμβηξ, βέμβιξ) was a common toy in ancient Greece. Made of various materials, but particularly of wood and terracotta, spinning tops could have different shapes, two of them being the most commonly observed: the first is shaped like a cone or a disc with a stem on top for spinning the toy, either by hand or through a string wrapped around the toy (fig. 1); the second has a cylindrical body ending in a short, conical tip, often with grooves on the sides. To spin this latter top, one has to strike it with a whip (*masfex*), which is also used to keep the toy in motion (fig. 2).

Greek Geometric tops, either with or without the stem on top for spinning the toy, are generally the interpretation given to certain terracotta conical items. Some of them are worth mentioning here: the piece from the British Museum, whose exact provenance and chronology are unknown (fig. 3); and the top from Grave 3 on the south slope of the Akropolis at Athens (Angelopoulos Plot, excavation 1961; fig. 4). The latter, dating from the early 8th century BC (MG II), was published by Dontas as a spinning top, and as such is now on display in the Akropolis Museum (Dontas 1961-1962: 86, 90-91, pl. 34). Additionally, it is useful to draw attention to three other artefacts belonging to the so-called "Berlin-München Fundgruppe aus Attika" (fig. 5), whose features and sizes definitively resemble the shape of the aforementioned spinning tops (CVA Deutschland 9, München 3: pl. 129, 3-5). The "Berlin-München Fundgruppe" (CVA Deutschland 9, München 3: pls. 125, 129; CVA Deutschland 85, Berlin 10: pls. 3-6), unanimously dated to the middle of the 9th century BC (transition from EG II to MG I), is an acquisition from the antiquarian market from the beginning of the last century, later split between Munich and Berlin, and thought to be very likely coming from an Athenian child's grave.



Fig. 1. Bone spinning top (h 2 cm; diam. 2.3 cm) from Eretria (Greece); 330-270 BC. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines (© 2009 RMN-Grand Palais; musée du Louvre / Hervé Lewandowski).



Fig. 2. Clay spinning top from Thebes (Greece), Kabirion sanctuary; 5th century BC. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines, CA 447 (© 2019 RMN-Grand Palais; musée du Louvre / Tony Querrec).



Fig. 3. Clay spinning top (h 11,43 cm); Geometric Period (8th century BC). London, British Museum.



Fig. 4. Clay spinning top (h 12,7 cm) from Grave 3, Akropolis, south slope; Middle Geometric II (early 8th century BC). Athens, Akropolis Museum.

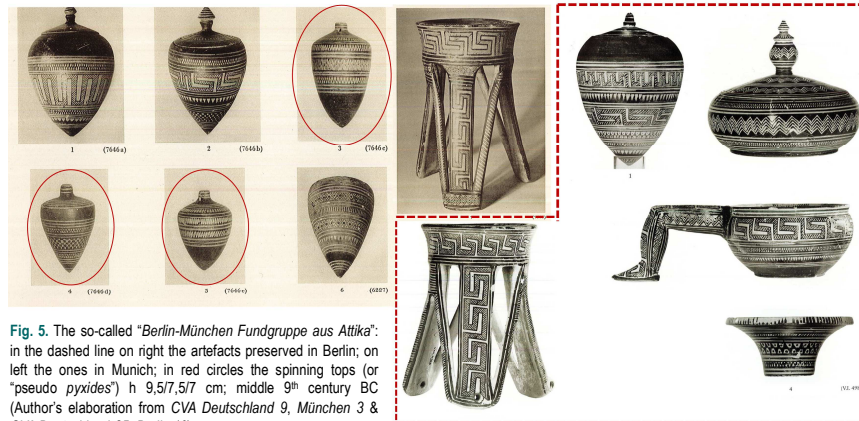


Fig. 5. The so-called "Berlin-München Fundgruppe aus Attika": in the dashed line on right the artefacts found in Berlin; on left the ones in Munich; in red circles the spinning tops (or "pseudo pyxides") h 9,5/7,5/7 cm; middle 9th century BC (Author's elaboration from CVA Deutschland 9, München 3 & CVA Deutschland 85, Berlin 10).

Athenian Geometric pointed *pyxides*, apparently a bizarre and rare shape, have mostly been found in famous grave groups brought to light between the end of 19th and the first half of 20th century in Athens, on the slopes of the Akropolis and in the area between the Areopagus and the Athenian Agora respectively (an accurate list in Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017: 780-783). It is worth pointing out that all the graves stand out as **exceptionally wealthy burials**, containing a large amount of pottery, exotic and prestige goods, metal tools, and jewellery, clearly demonstrating the dead's claims to *élite status* (fig. 6).

Not all the listed tombs with pointed *pyxides* are accompanied by published analyses of the human remains, and we know how slippery it is to rely only on the vagaries of the assemblages and on what grave goods might be deemed – at any given time – gender-specific. But when the study of human remains is available, pointed *pyxides* are mostly reported to belong to **female graves** of either sub-adult or adult individuals (Papadopoulos, Smithson 2017, 506-508, table 3.2). While discussing what she refers to as the "maiden kit", which consists of dolls made of Attic Fine Handmade Incised Ware, terracotta models of boots and chests, *kalathoi*, and spiral hair ornaments, Langdon (2008: 130-143) suggests that pointed *pyxides* might be «maiden-linked» as well (Langdon 2008: 130). But she does not explore this interpretation any further. The current scholarship agrees that in Early Iron Age Athens the graves of girls and women, at least between EG and MG, are the richest in terms of quantity and range of objects. Besides, they tend to be marked by the deposition of a host of gender-specific grave goods symbolically alluding to the nuptial sphere, as being a virtuous bride and a good and prolific mother were the ultimate and only purpose of women's lives. Focusing on marriage in elite burial groups evokes double loss, not only of the *parthenos*/young bride/young mother herself but also of her potential to produce offspring.

To which symbolic horizon may the pointed *pyxides* be referring? Used in Athens until the mid-8th century BC, they seem to have been firmly embedded in a coherent funerary system pertaining to female individuals. On the one hand, it is possible that these vessels contained jewels or other precious objects belonging to the deceased (e.g. exotic ointments or perfumed powders) that signaled elite status, and as such, they may have been displayed during elaborate funerary ceremonies. On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the close resemblance between the shape of the vessels and that of the contemporary spinning tops: by resembling the shape of the spinning top, the pointed *pyxis* might have acted as a *simulacrum* of it, a symbolic reference to the complex and multifaceted semantic status of the toy.

Being inspired by the close similarity within the "Berlin-München Fundgruppe" between the so-called Geometric pointed *pyxides* and the cone-shaped tops (the latter being sometimes not interpreted as such, but rather labelled "pseudo-*pyxides*", as they are closed and full terracotta objects), I would like to propose a competing argument that suggests that the **pointed *pyxis* may purposefully resemble a spinning top**, also discussing the possible cultural significance of this suggestion. The hypothesis was actually mentioned *en passant* by Dorothy Kent Hill while describing a similar *pyxis* in Baltimore, but the idea had little success (Kent Hill 1956: 37).

The pointed *pyxis*, one of the most elegant and colorful Athenian Geometric vases, is a wheel-made and painted ware whose development, already well mapped by Coldstream (1968: 11, 17, 23) and Bohén (1988: 24-27), has been more recently revised by Papadopoulos and Smithson (2017: 780-783). The vase, whose height ranges from 13 cm to 17 cm, appears in the Early Geometric I (900-875 BC) as a new creation without real precedents in the Proto-geometric Period and enjoys its great popularity between a later phase of the Early Geometric (875-850 BC) and the Middle Geometric I (850-800 BC). The shape slowly disappears before the end of the Middle Geometric II (800-760 BC). The origin of the shape is unclear and still poses a challenging problem.

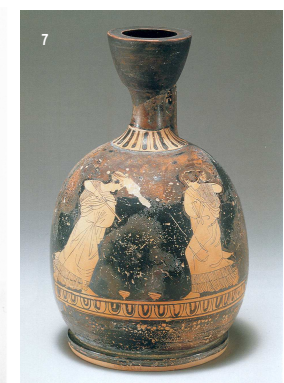
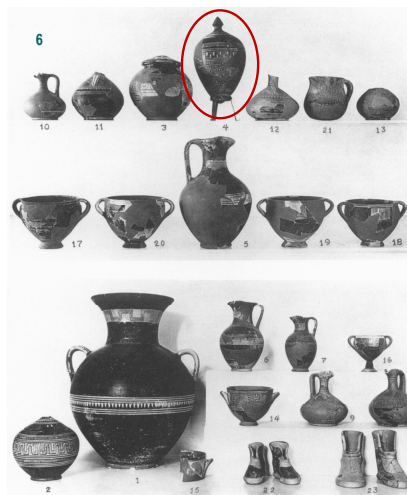


Fig. 6. Athens, north slope of the Areopagus, the "Boots Grave"; EG I (YOUNG 1949: pl. 67).

Fig. 7. Attic red figure lekythos; women "playing" with spinning tops; 440-430 BC. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 8. Apulian pelike with Eros spinning the top between two girls; 370-360 BC. Matera, Museo Nazionale "Domenico Ridola".

In ancient literature tops have a very long tradition of serving as a **metaphor for a heterodirect psychological condition** linked to feelings such as hatred, happiness, but particularly love and passion, whose devastating power makes human beings rotate without being able to resist. In this regard, it is also worth mentioning the special **connection of spinning tops with girls or young women, Eros, and the love sphere**, as often seen on Greek vase paintings from the Classical period (figs. 7-8). Scholars agree in possibly recognizing in these latter scenes references to divinatory practices comparable to drawing lots for a good wedding within the context of prenuptial ceremonies (*proteleia*): «le jeu dévoile l'avenir amoureux. Aux mouvements aléatoires de la toupie s'ajoute le klédón, une parole spontanée qui constitue un message divin. Le présage concerne le choix d'un mariage» (Dasen 2016: 78). In other words, young brides are supposed to be "playing" with spinning tops to receive a divine message, an *omen* related to the crucial choice of a good marriage (Dasen 2016 & 2017; Giومان 2020: 16-48). Interestingly, when the archaeological context is known, Greek red-figure vases with painted scenes representing young women spinning tops are strongly associated with *airoi's* tombs. In a broader, and even more meaningful perspective, the toy, a turning object whose rotations are unpredictable, might have represented a **turning point of life** from childhood to adulthood, from unmarried to married status, even from life to death and the related unpredictable paths.

From this perspective, I am rather convinced that it is plausible to establish a symbolic connection between Geometric spinning tops and these extraordinary terracotta containers. Pointed *pyxides* could have hardly been used in daily life, but they would have been suitable as display objects in lavish funerary ceremonies of Geometric élite individuals as a *memento* of the unpredictable duration of life, and a marker of an *omen* for a good marriage that never came or was dramatically interrupted by premature death.

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