



# Ancient Greek TOYS



GreektOys 2016

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Kylix, boy playing with his yoyo, 440-420 BC, Berlin, Altes Museum.

# Introduction to "Ancient Greek Toys" guide

The present guide is the result of many years of work and record keeping regarding ancient Greek toys. With love and passion for the ancient Greek world, we gathered and registered valuable material from museums in Greece and other European countries, for young and older readers. Through these pages you will learn about ancient Greek toys and have the chance to see the most common exhibits that have endured through time. Although nowadays these toys stand only as exhibits in museums, thousands of years ago they were a source of joy, creativity and game-play for children.

Sofia Pavlaki



## Ancient toys

Since ancient times the pedagogical value and significance of toys has been established, for the proper physical, mental, cognitive and social development of a child. Through game process, a child uses his imagination to have fun, learn to interact with other children, explore surrounding environments, discover himself and cultivate creativity. Moreover, a child matures and learns to use practical knowledge and skills.

According to Plato, educational toys help children to better prepare for their future profession and their role in society. "And by the use of games one shall strive to turn the tastes and the desires of children to the goal they are to attain in adulthood." (as referred in Hasselin, 2006, par. 2)

In ancient Greece there was a great variety of group or individual games, with or without the use of objects. Some of these games are still known to this day as the prisoner's base, the blind man's buff (chalki mia), statues (akinitida), knucklebones (pentalitha), hide and seek (apodidraskindra), dolls (plangôns), rattles (platagi) and little horse figurines. These games are known to us from three sources:

- toys that have been unearthed during archaeological excavations, mainly in graves
- written sources of ancient authors
- representations on vases and tombstones.



Buffalo on wheels,  
Classical period, Paris,  
Louvre Museum.



## Materials and construction methods

*Athirma* is the ancient word for game, particularly for the object that children use for playing, from the ancient verb *athiro* (to play, to have fun). The main material for toy-making was clay, as evidenced by the large number of terracotta figurines that have survived. Toys were also made from bones, leather, wood, wax and cloth. Unfortunately, such toys have not survived due to their delicate construction material. Their construction was held in terracotta figurine workshops. Most toys were kneaded by hand, but since the 5th century BC, molds were primarily used in order modelers to be able to create the same game over and over again.

According to this technique, the modeler first made a matrix on an original model and filled it with liquid clay. As soon as the clay was dry, it was removed from the matrix. Then the toy was covered with a white coating, baked in an oven and finally painted.



Mold used to mass-produced clay dolls,  
Taranto, National  
Archaeological Museum.



Rattle mold, Taranto, National Archaeological Museum.

## The first toys

On their birth day, children would receive their first gifts which of course were toys! Usually they were items that made noise, like rattles. They were mainly made from clay and occasionally from metal. Inside them were small beads that produced sound. Different shape rattles have been unearthed, the most common are bell-shaped, while others have human form and the most impressive ones have animal form.

Small vessels that served as nursing bottles were included among the first ever toys children received. The pump had a small animal figure to ease the baby's transition from breastfeeding to eating from a bottle.



Zoomorphic feeding bottle, 450 BC, Paris, Louvre Museum.

On the fifth or seventh day after the birth of a child, friends and family celebrated Amphiromia. During the ceremony, they lifted the newborn and carried him around the fire which was considered a family altar. After the ceremony family and friends gathered for a feast. In Athens the ceremony took place the tenth day after the birth of the child, where family gave the newborn its name and offered him toys, while in Rome they also offered the child a talisman, called bulla for boys and lunula for girls (Hasselin, 2006).

The children would also receive gifts on their birthdays, at the beginning of the year and on religious holidays such as Anthesteria, a festival in honor of Dionysus.



Rattle, 700 BC, Paris, Louvre Museum.





*Girl playing astragaloi (knucklebones), 150 AD, Berlin, Altes Museum.*



# Toy Categories

## Toddlers' toys

A child in infancy would typically receive toys that could generate noise, made from metal or clay and shaped mainly in human and animal form or simply in the form of a bell. A typical example is the rattle.

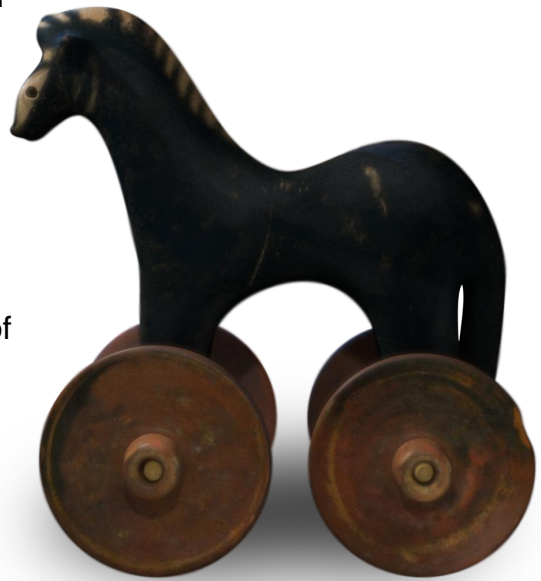
## Imitation toys

Imitation toys were those that allowed children to "mimic" the world of the grownups. The purpose of these games was to develop their imagination, personality and understanding of the world surrounding them.

The most common imitation toys were dolls or "plagones". There were jointed dolls with movable arms and legs known as "nevrospaston". Small clay pots, tables and beds complemented the magical world of girls. Archaeologists have also discovered dolls for boys, mainly in the form of warriors.

One of the most favorite boys' toys was a two-wheeled or four-wheeled buggy, which one child rode and another drawn. In some occasions these buggies were drawn by animals like dogs.

Except of buggies, there were also animal-shaped toys on wheels, where parents fitted a bridle for their children to learn how to ride carriages. The most popular ones were those in the shape of a horse.

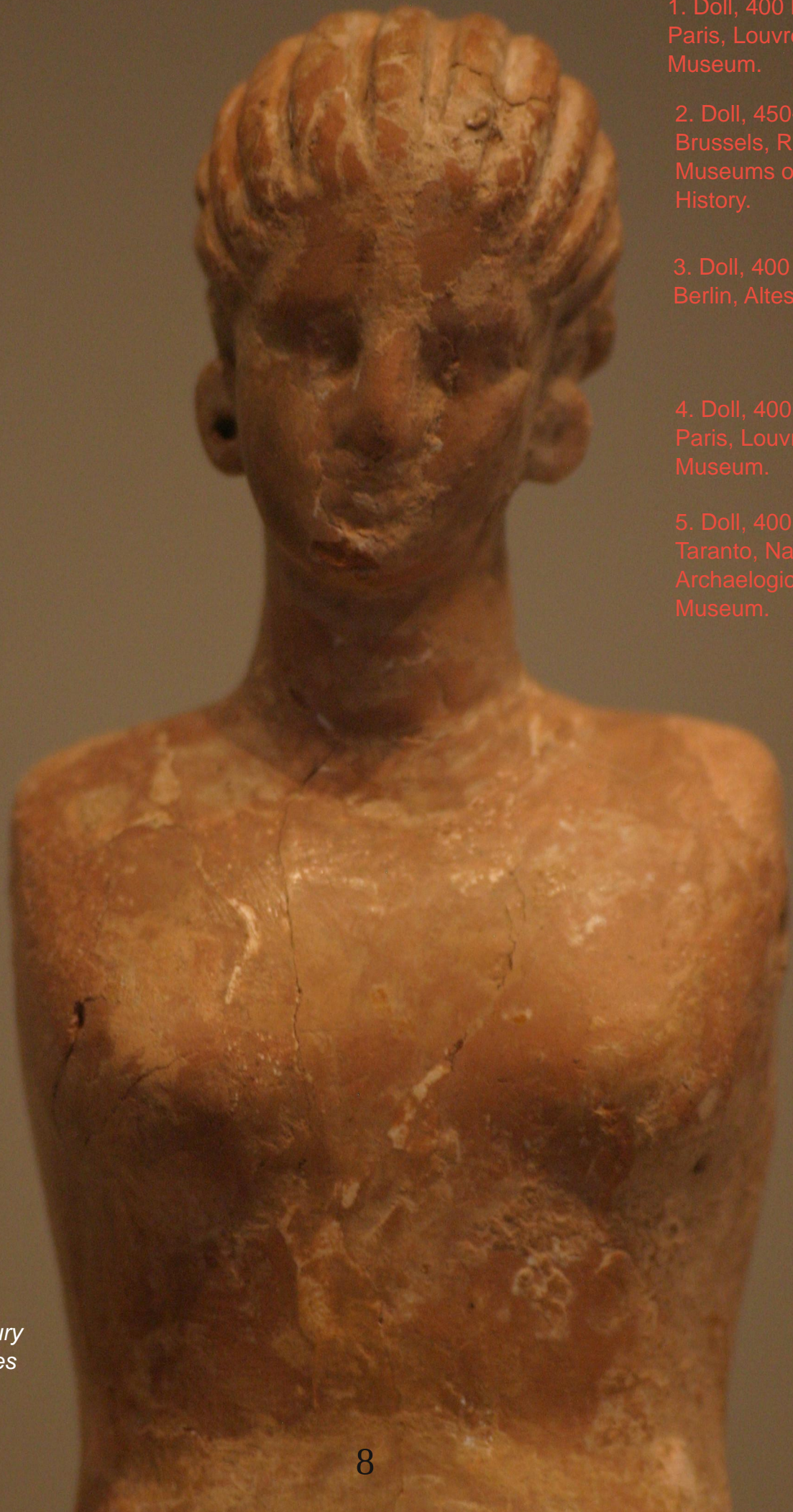


Little horse on wheels, 950-900 BC, Athens, Kerameikos Archaeological Museum.



Chous, boy drawing another in a cart, 450-430 BC, Brussels, Royal Museums of Art and History.





1. Doll, 400 BC,  
Paris, Louvre  
Museum.

2. Doll, 450-350 BC,  
Brussels, Royal  
Museums of Art and  
History.

3. Doll, 400 BC,  
Berlin, Altes Museum.

4. Doll, 400 BC,  
Paris, Louvre  
Museum.

5. Doll, 400 BC,  
Taranto, National  
Archaeological  
Museum.

*Doll, 4th century  
BC, Berlin, Altes  
Museum.*



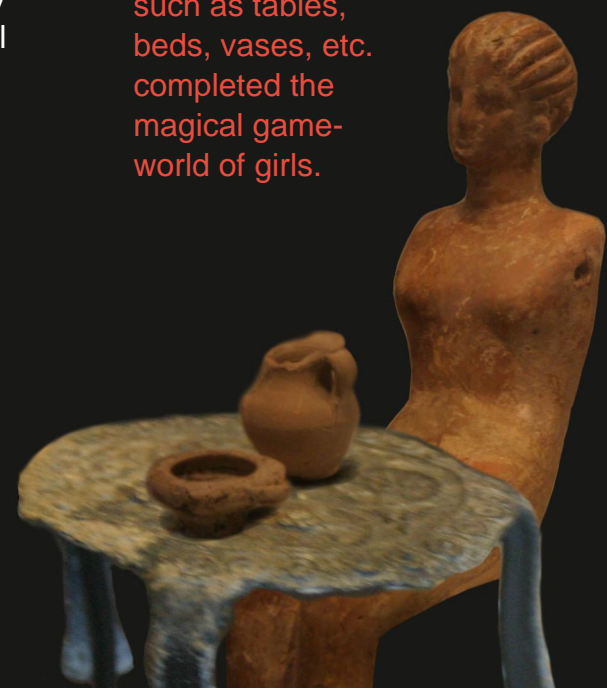
# Plagones: The most popular ancient dolls!



Plagones were beautiful colorful dolls, with elegant hairstyles and with magical properties that appealed to young and old. The oldest toy in the world evolved from a religious figurine to a doll and played an important role in the development of young girls. A decisive step in differentiating religious figurines to dolls was the appearance of a jointed doll (nevrospaston) with movable arms and legs, while the use of mold by modelers would boost mass production so as every girl could own her favorite heroine!

Plagones were one of the favorite girls' toys in ancient Greece. It was a female figure doll usually made of clay and with complicated hairstyles. In some cases the clothing of the doll was painted on it, while in other cases, girls were sewing clothes for their dolls out of rags. Plagones had an educational character too, by introducing girls to the role and obligations of a woman in society. On the eve of every girl's wedding day, plagones were dedicated to the goddess Artemis.

Small objects such as tables, beds, vases, etc. completed the magical game-world of girls.



## Skill toys

The yo-yo, as we know it to this day, was a popular toy where children should work out the ability to roll up and down a wooden or clay object that was tied to the end of a thread. The ancient name of the yo-yo is not known.

Another skill toy was *stromvos* or spinning top. There were different types of tops, with different shapes and colors. The child could play with the top in two ways: by spinning it until it stopped or by continuing to rotate it using a small whip.

The *iygga* was a disc or small wheel with two up to four holes that the kids double-threaded. They then held the thread on both ends and rotated the wheel stretching and easing it with rhythmic movement, producing a sound that is reminiscent of a bird, the *iygga* (wryneck). Legend says that *iygga* gave Zeus a potion to fall in love with Io. Hera, mad out of jealousy, transformed her into a bird.

A game that even adult men played was the hoop or the wheel. The child threw the hoop and skillfully using a stick to keep it moving. Adults played hoop on *palaestrae* (wrestling arena) for exercise. It was made of copper, was big in size and heavier than the equivalent children's toy.



Spinning top,  
Hellenistic period,  
Paris, Louvre  
Museum.



Yo-yo, Hellenistic  
period, Paris, Louvre  
Museum.



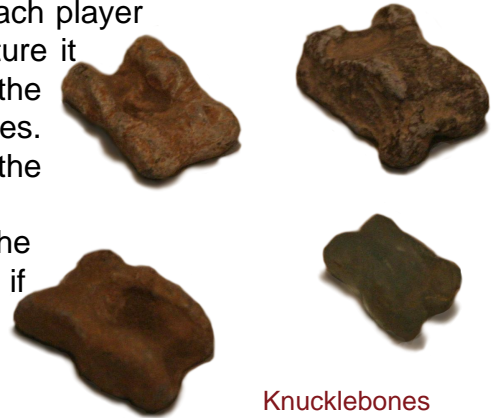
Spinning top,  
Hellenistic period,  
Paris, Louvre  
Museum.

Young girl playing with a  
spinning top; she holds a  
small whip to rotate it, 5th  
century. B.C., Brussels,  
Royal Museum of Art and  
History

## Knucklebones

Knucklebones were usually made from animal knuckles or from copper and other materials. It was played mostly by women and children. Knucklebones were a skill game, but they were also used as dices. They were used for playing pentelitha. As pentovola is played today, also in the respective game back then, people used 5 knucklebones. Each player would throw a knucklebone to the air and then try to recapture it after he would first pick up another knucklebone from the ground. Instead of knucklebones, people also used pebbles. Another way of playing this game would be to try and catch the knucklebones with the back of his hand.

Children also played even or odd. One would hide the knucklebones in his hand and the other would try and guess if the number of knucklebones was odd or even.



Knucklebones (astragali), Berlin, Altes Museum.

## The Ball

Ball games were played either individually or in groups. The ball or sphere was made from sewn leather or cloth strips. Due to their perishable material, balls could not have survived up to this day, but archaeologists have unearthed small balls made of clay that give us an idea of how they were back in ancient times. Pollux describes various types of ball games. One of them was called aporraxis: the child would throw the ball hard to the ground and try to bounce it repeatedly. Winner would be the one to bounce the ball more times (Onomasticon IX, 106).

In another game, children would try and turn over a stone hitting it with balls from a distance. The player who failed to turn over the stone would then carry the winner on his back blindfolded. This punishment was called Ephedrismos (Onomasticon IX, 119).



Ephedrismos, 430-420 BC, Berlin, Altes Museum.

## Dice

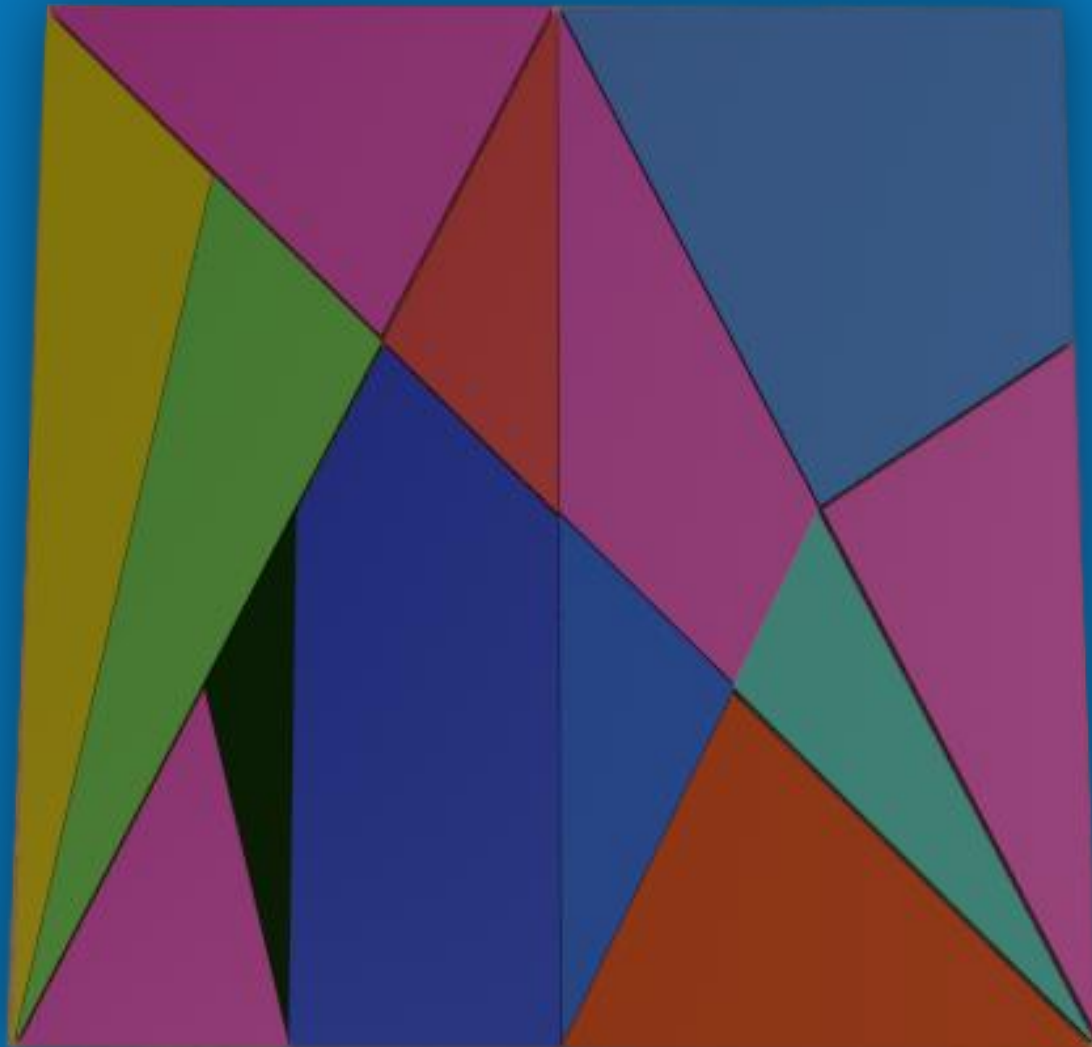
Same as today, the dice or pessos, had multiple resting positions, with each of its six faces showing a different number from 1 to 6. It belonged to the category of gambling games and was also played by men. It was made of clay, bone, ivory, copper or other precious metal.



Dice, Roman imperial period, Milan, Archaeological Museum.



# Ostomachion: from a simple game to a mathematical problem!



Ostomachion, 3D  
representation by  
Greektoys.org

Ostomachion, also known as stomachion, was a famous spiritual game of antiquity. The word means "bone-fight". In literary interpretations, the name "stomachion" seems to come from the distress caused by the difficulty of the game.

Players used 14 specific level polygons to form different geometric shapes and figures, such as an elephant, a flying goose, even a warrior with a sword! The game was collective and could involve two or more players with mind skills and imagination.

The magic of the game touched Archimedes mathematical thinking, who came up with the following math problem: in how many ways these 14 specific polygons could be arranged to form a square?

These were some of the toys/games that children played with during antiquity. But as soon as children grew up, they dedicated their toys to a deity. For example, girls on the eve of their wedding day, would dedicate their dolls to Artemis, Hera and Aphrodite. Thus the circle of childhood was closed...

But games and toys never stopped evolving. During the passage of time they changed in material, form and name, but their essence remained the same. It is worth visiting a museum that houses ancient toys, to see them up close and be impressed by the number of which still exist today.



Modern games influenced  
by ancient games



Jacks, modern knucklebones,  
Indianapolis, Children's Museum,  
Photo: The Children's Museum of  
Indianapolis

# Ancient Greek toys meet Greektoys!

Three toys from Ancient Greece are the main characters of the series. Valios is a little horse-toy made of clay, Lilly is a rattle and Filon is a baby's milk bottle in a pig shape. Our little friends live adventures and travel in other countries where they meet toys of other civilizations. Greektoys aims to teach children in an amusing way the cultural heritage of Greece.

## Lilly bell

Her name is Helen referring to Helen of Sparta, but her friends call her Lily.

It is a clay "platagi", a rattle. Infants would hold it from its head and by waving it, the rattle would move its jointed body members, ie the legs, producing sounds to ease the baby's cry.



## Valios the little horse figurine

It is a clay horse figurine with castors, which the child would drag around by pulling its bridle.

The name is a reference to Balius, one of the two immortal horses of Achilles (the other was called Xanthus). Poseidon gave Balius to king Peleus, father of Achilles, as a wedding gift.

According to tradition, both horses were Titans, allies of Zeus and Poseidon, who were later transformed into horses.

## Philon the little bottle

It is an ancient pig-shaped vessel, used not only as a nursing bottle but also as a toy. The pump had a small animal figure to ease the baby's transition from breastfeeding to eating from a bottle.

The Greek name Philon was common in ancient times. Few examples are philosophers Philon of Larissa and Philon of Alexandria as well as mathematician Philon of Byzantium. The specific name was selected because Philon refers to the word "philos" (friend), and the nursing bottle was actually the first children's "friend", the first toy.





## Bambolina

Bampolina is a doll, discovered in Southern Italy region (Magna Graecia). She is the fastest tarantella dancer! The series protagonists met her during their journey in Graecia Salentina together with a music band, called Encardia.



Visit Greektoys website to watch episodes of the series, read articles about toys in ancient times and be informed about the progress of the project "Greektoys: Young Archaeologists".

<http://greektoys.org>



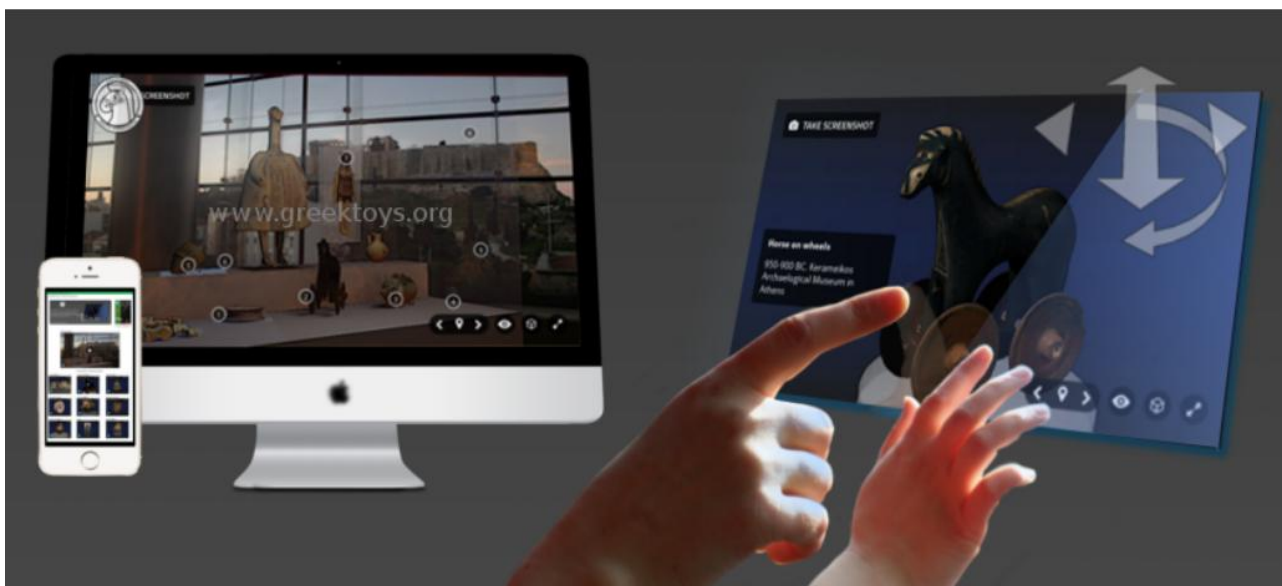


# 3D Museum of Ancient Greek Toys

The best toys' exhibits of ancient Greece from the Louvre museum, the Museum of Cycladic Art, the ancient Kerameikos etc. are presented in three-dimensional form at the Virtual Greektoys Museum. Following the reconstruction of Amphipolis tomb 3D model, Greektoys presents a collection of ancient Greek toys, through Sketchfab application. With just one click you can browse, zoom in on details and get information regarding the date of each exhibit and in which museum it can be located. Simply use a computer mouse or a touch-screen!

Seeing all ancient Greek toys in one museum is practically impossible, since the findings are scattered in many museums around Greece but also abroad. Therefore, the Virtual Greektoys Museum brings together the most iconic exhibits, through technology the Museum provides users the ability to have a comprehensive view of how toys were during ancient times and thus promote our ancient Greek heritage.

Visit the museum [here](http://www.greektoys.org).



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