

The child and childhood in the culture of the Middle Ages, in the light of selected archaeological sources¹

Izabela Gomulka^a

The article is an attempt to determine the attitude towards children in a mediaeval community, basing on selected archaeological sources, first of all toy findings. These sources may undermine the claim that in the Middle Ages there was no awareness of the individuality of a child. In the mediaeval period there was a complete canon of toys. Its durability and usefulness proves the methodical and purposeful selection of toys by the parents. The importance of the child is also stressed by the attempts to provide the children with more valuable and modern toys, such as clay figurines of horses. The analysis of sources on gambling games has revealed that parents tried to protect their children against the destructive nature of games. All of these sources show a picture of a child who is a constant companion for adults and the people around it are its guides.

KEY-WORDS: Middle Ages, childhood, children, toys, gambling games

The place of a child within the mediaeval society is still a topic under discovery, discussed not only by historians, educators and anthropologists, but also by archaeologists. It requires the use of tools from many fields which together allow us to discover the real picture of the world of children, with the least possible interference of contemporary adults, who were considered in historical sources as its main creators. Being aware of this interference, we can try to determine their attitude towards children. Records and data on mediaeval families that we have, should be seen from the point of view of the limitations as well as the social and cultural customs which strictly defined how to behave and pass on the knowledge of the contemporary world to one's descendants.

^a Institute of Archaeology, University of Wrocław, 48 Szewska St., 50-139 Wrocław, Poland; iza.gomulka@poczta.onet.pl

¹ The article published under the project *Children's toys to the end of the 19th century on Polish lands*. Project funded by the National Science Center awarded on the basis of the decision number UMO-2012/07/B/H53/00899.

Historical reflections on the essence of childhood began to develop from the ground-breaking publication of Philippe Ariès, 'Centuries of Childhood' from 1960 (see similar opinions: deMause 1974; 1999). Basing on different sources he presents the mediaeval child as a being less worthy than an adult, treated indifferently until it becomes a fully-fledged person. He advances his main postulate on the basis of iconography, in which in the early Middle Ages children do not appear, because this stage of life was treated as temporary and too uncertain for its image to be worth preserving. Till a certain point of its life, the child was not considered as a future adult, due to the fairly high probability that it might die by then. The mediaeval art depicts the child mostly as a smaller adult, along with the muscles and facial features or uses the image of a child to depict Baby Jesus, angels, soul or death and does not show the images of real children. However, the iconography and written sources of the Middle Ages served specific purposes, such as passing on the glory and greatness of individuals to future generations or the rigorous determination of the principles of functioning within a society, which constituted the form of power over the people, enforced in varying degrees. In such records or iconographic representations, there are no reasons to commemorate the children who constituted a social group, which was not yet independent, nor fully determined.

Another confirmation of the lower value of children according to Ariès, was the children's clothing that throughout the period of the Middle Ages was not much different from the adults' clothes. Children, as a social group of low status, did not wear clothes designed and made especially for them, because their cost would be too high. Instead, they became heirs to ancient traditions, an example of which is the first outfit after infancy – a long dress, harking back to a mediaeval habit that was worn in the 12th and 13th century. One should remember that the outfit in the mediaeval period was of a much higher value than today, and the materials the clothes were made of were a luxury and therefore children were not entitled to them, rather than because of children's lower social status. Another indication of treating a small child as a member of society that did not possess full rights Ariès mentions is the custom of burying the prematurely dead children outside the cemetery. However, this custom is connected with the religious practices rather than the social ones. It was not associated with the conviction of the low value of a small child, but of its impure nature that could only be transformed through the ritual of baptism. That practice was therefore caused mainly by the fear of impurity of an unbaptised child (see Delimata 2004a; 2004b; Duma 2010; Stepniak 2010).

Ariès's thesis ruling that in the Middle Ages there was no awareness of the individuality of a child could be contrasted by the idea that there was a different perception of a child. The fact of not recognizing childhood in high art and luxury cannot obscure the image preserved in records and relics relating to everyday life. The natural lack of children's self-reliance isolated them from the world of valuables and the glory of

preserving their image for future generations. One of the most important factors that influenced the perception of the child in the Middle Ages was high child mortality. The number of children per family was closely linked to its material status, place of living, and historical situation. The exposure to the diseases and plagues, especially within the cities surrounded by walls, was of great importance. The population growth was limited not only by high child mortality rate, but also by the mortality of women during childbirth (Fig. 1). It was mainly the result of poor sanitary conditions during childbirth as well as insufficient medical knowledge. This situation probably created a barrier for the parents precluding them from forming a deep attachment to children and from commemorating their images for posterity. The weaker contact with children was also affected by the custom of sending them to another house for educational purposes. Most often they were replaced by another apprentice, who gathered the parent's attention. The written sources on everyday life provide us with ample evidence that the youngest were not treated with indifference. The concern for the children was visible in the monasteries which were dedicated mainly to children's care (see Buliński 2002: 103) or the laws addressing the issues of caring for orphaned and abandoned children, as well as the problems of child labour (Nowak 1998: 108–109). Numerous legal and property regulations were preserved, designed to provide the child with decent future existence (see Nowak 1998: 105–109). Another important confirmation of the social position of children was assigning them specific functions during the annual rites or serving at the table. In many cases citywide acts regulated children's participation in feasts, ceremonies and celebrations where the children played their specific roles, such as being members of the church choir.

The evidence of parents' special care can be also found in the archaeological material. In addition to toys discovered during the research there are also all sorts of items designated for the child, such as cradles, walkers, dishes and pillows, which are confirmed by the prevalence of bequests (Nowak 1998: 108–111). Toys are a very important and often underestimated source of knowledge about mediaeval childhood. A child's world was created by the environment in which the child functioned and to which it tried to adapt in the process of cultural assimilation, largely based on material culture. The lack of common forms of schooling meant that imitation was the most important cognitive tool.



Fig. 1. Death of a child. *Danse macabre*, France, the end of the 15th century, Paris National Library

The canon of mediaeval toys itself demonstrates the basic education that was a part of a child's upbringing. In the prehistoric times we find traces of attempts to provide toys for the youngest, but mostly they oscillate at the border of fun and faith. The prehistoric toys we know today are primarily rattles, clay figurines of birds, beads, miniature dishes and other items of daily use (see Koszańska 1936: 153; Ćwirko-Godycki and Wrzosek 1936/1937: 171–254; Wiczorkowski 1938; Kostrzewski 1946; Rabięga 1949: 116–119; Kołosówna 1950: 193–239). However, they have a completely different form, character and context of the findings than typical toys, often clearly referring to the worship of sun, ancestors, or nature. The confirmation of the ludic function of some of these items are primarily the finds from Biskupin – miniature objects, bearing the traces of being crafted by children, mostly in the form of fingerprints (Kołosówna 1950: 219). The selection of toys from that period, however, was not very varied and the function of these artefacts was ambiguous. In contrast, in the mediaeval period there was a complete canon of toys, which in a slightly modified form survived until the 19th century, and provides the basis of toy manufacturing today. Its durability and usefulness proves the methodical and purposeful selection of toys in the Middle Ages.

In the mediaeval canon of toys we can distinguish three basic functional groups in terms of their impact on the most important stages of child development:

1. Toys associated with motoric and manual development;
2. Miniature objects, helping socialization;
3. Toy instruments, allowing for assimilation with the adult world.

The picture of early childhood in mediaeval records focuses primarily on the child's physical infirmity and social uselessness. However, the vision of a child left to itself, while waiting to become independent, is contradicted both by the iconographic sources that depict the children in specially constructed walkers (mostly in the paintings of the 'cycles of life', see Fig. 2), as well as by archaeological finds of toys influencing the motoric development of the child. One can assume of course that toys such as balls made of different materials, slightly processed and recycled kitchen waste, or specimens the design of which was based on a stick, were crafted only because of their simple form and little effort that needed to make them, and not for the sake of a child's development. It is contradicted both by the number and by variety of toys that fall into this category. An example would be a wooden spinning top that gave children the opportunity for a complex play, and mastering them, even today is a big challenge for the little ones (see Adamczyk 2010: 79–87; Romanowicz 2013: 172). The tops' surface was most often covered with simple ornamentation and their form had additional elements, providing a variety of options for play. Based on previous research there are at least six different types of spinning tops (see Rulewicz 1958: 306–312; Kunicka-Okuliczowa 1959: 108–121; Antowska-Gorączniak 2003: 77–78). They required not only a stable ground, but above all, high agility of the child. Tops were set in motion by



Fig. 2. Stages of life. Woodcut from *De proprietatibus rerum* by Bartholomeus Anglicus, 1486

wrapping a cord around a whittled neck and then pulling it. Making a little hole in the upper part of the top and putting a stick inside it served the same purpose. Even more skill was required to master spinning the top by undercutting it with a little whip. Probably when stable ground was less accessible, the top makers got an idea of sticking a needle or a nail in the lower part of the spinning top, to be able to put it into the ground (Fig. 3). In winter an even greater challenge was spinning tops on ice, which is an often-recurring motif in the work of, among others, Pieter Brueghel (*Winter Landscape with a Bird Trap*, 1565; *The Hunters in the Snow*, 1565; *The Census at Bethlehem*, 1566). Creating such complex and difficult to use toys for children, at a time when toys were created in spare time at home, proved the commitment and care of adults. The variety of play methods, which could only be invented by adults who constructed the tops, testifies to the awareness of the specific needs in the child's development. Similar was, most probably, the case of balls that were carefully sewn



Fig. 3. Boys playing with spinning tops with the whip and cord, detail from *Children's Games* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1560

from several clippings of leather in order to secure the filling, or intricately woven from rawhides. A ball gave not only a very high degree of freedom and variety of play, but most of all it was a common entertainment for children and adults. The same purpose was served by small skates and sleds, which were the source of winter entertainment.

The primary benchmarks for determining the length of childhood in the Middle Ages were social relations. The main goal of upbringing was to achieve physical abilities and skills that allowed to play certain social roles. Along with the children, even some adults were a socially marginal group until they could play specific independent roles in the. This social construct was strongly related to the custom of apprenticeship – learning through habit and practice. The child became an apprentice when it no longer needed intense maternal care, i.e., around 7–8 years of age. It was most commonly associated with leaving the family home and starting the service with learning as its main purpose. Therefore, the core of education was studying by imitating adults with the use of miniaturized objects related to their work and other daily activities. It is to this period in child's life that we can assign toys teaching how to prepare meals and implement table etiquette as well as replicate the activities performed by artisans and the ability to use tools (Fig. 4). Apprenticeship was closely related to learning the profession but in practice it also involved other necessary skills, as in the Middle Ages there was no distinctive boundary between private and professional life. Apprenticeship marked the end of the period when the child could use its toys freely and when the only limits of the play were drawn by the child's own imagination. There still must

have been some time intended for play, but its character was probably already controlled by the adults. The play had to be a reflection of everyday life of the child, as



Fig. 4. Spinning peasant couple. Woodcut from *Cosmographie* by Sebastian Münsters, Basel 1544

well as part of learning the craft, eating etiquette or wielding weapons. Hence the use of small tools, wooden weapons, and miniature tableware. Among the most popular household items were all kinds of toy clay dishes, as well as other elements of 'tableware', such as small buckets or teaspoons. In addition to cooking utensils some single specimens associated with other crafts have been found, such as miniature whorls, beetles, washing bats and spatula.

An important part of mediaeval childhood was also the participation in a variety of celebrations and festivals. Written sources emphasize the active participation of children and even assigning them special functions in this area. An inseparable part of all celebrations was music and dancing, which drew children closer to the world of the adults. Numerous iconographic sources and simple musical instruments found along with toys emphasize their role in children's socialization process (Fig. 5). The range of toy instruments is quite wide – from simple whistles and pipes to flutes, as well as bone flutes, bells and drums. Probably the first instrument and a toy for a child was a rattle.

In the Early Middle Ages its two opposing functions coexisted: the apotropaic and ludic. Among the oldest forms of rattles, which were typical toys, there were some less carefully crafted imitations of rattles made for ceremonial purposes, which in time became part of the basic canon of toys. The fact that the object of worship, losing its importance, was passed into the hands of a child suggests that the child can not have had a low social significance. The introduction of Christianity was clearly of progressive nature; the old beliefs not only partially infiltrated the enforced religion, but also were often in use for a long time afterwards. The transformation of the form associated with beliefs into a children's toy has its deep roots and reflects the great importance of childhood. It is believed that the great value of play consists in its possible origination from the rudimentary forms of ancient rituals. In this model a ritual is transformed into play as a result of the decay of the rite (Bujak 1988: 18). J. Huizinga said that playing was the basis of the whole human culture. In his words: '*...from the myth and culture(...) derives great motive force of cultural life(...) And they are all(...) deeply rooted in the ground of play*' (Huizinga 1967: 16–17). Looking from this perspective we appreciate the great value of play which allowed to preserve the elements of a bygone culture.



Fig. 5. Dancing girl with hanging little bell on the sleeve, detail from *The Peasant Dance* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1567

The fact of a deliberate selection of toys, dictated by concern for the proper development of children, is not the only proof of perceiving children's value found in the archaeological sources. Treating children as important members of the community is confirmed by the rarely found toys of greater value and higher craftsmanship and often also made of more valuable materials, perhaps designed for the youngest members of the higher social strata. However, in the case of the early mediaeval specimens it is not always possible to distinguish them from the ritual attributes, and the late mediaeval specimens could have been collector's items. The attempts at providing the children with more valuable and modern toys are visible not only among the wealthiest societies. The analysis of the clay figurines of horses found in large numbers in Silesia shows that they were made of unusual material by skilled craftsmen who were able to give them a detailed form. What is more, were one of the first clay toys to be covered in glaze. The clay figurines of horses were a special line of production in pottery workshops. The same forms and methods of making figurines were used from the 13th to the 16th century in Bohemia, Moravia and Austria, and above all, in Germany and the Netherlands. German manufacturing centres are considered to be the source from which they were distributed through the long-distance trade (Schmidt 1934: 283). Pottery manufacturing centres produced various types of figurines, although mainly for devotional purposes, including Baby Jesus, Madonna and Child, the saints and the so called *Kruselerpüppchen*, of great artistic value and workmanship. However from the very beginning, due to the increasing popularity of individual religiosity, devotional figurines were accompanied by a variety of horse figurines (Fig. 6). All types of these figures reveal



Fig. 6. *Kruselerpüppchen* and horse figurine from Nuremberg, 14–15th century, Germanisches Nationalmuseum

a technological and stylistic similarity, and it is likely that from the 15th century they were locally designed and produced in Silesia, which is manifested by the presence of figurines with very similar features, and even found in several copies. One of the workshops was probably located near the Dominican Square in Wrocław where an extensive collection of figurines, considered to be production waste, was discovered in a facility that could have been a warehouse or a cold store from the 15th century. That place was definitely not a crafts workshop, as also ceramic dishes and roasting-spit supports were discovered there (Borkowski 2004). These facts show the process of introducing new solutions and borrowings to the world of children, as well as the attempts at local manufacturing in order to meet the needs of the youngest. This is another sign of the awareness of the importance of toys, as well as of the emotional attitude towards children – of the adults, who tried to satisfy the children's needs as well as they could.

The iconography of the late Middle and early Modern Ages clearly confirms the presence of children in everyday life of the adults. This image can be found not only in genre art or illustrations depicting the periods of life, but also in numerous manuscripts, especially in calendars, Hours of the Virgin or thematic books (e.g. *The Book of Clothes*, *The Golf Book*), which represented elite art. The mediaeval life was based on functioning in the community where social life dominated over personal life, and so the children, being non-self-reliant, were condemned to the constant company of adults. The question is to what extent did parents treat them as involuntary companions? The iconographic representations most often depicted the scenes where children were imitating the adults. In the manuscripts, they were presented below the main miniature, but clearly referring to its subject matter (compare *The Golf Book*, 1520–1530; *Romance of Alexander*, 1338–1444; *The Book of Hours of the Anglo Family*, 1500). We can assume that the parents recognized the importance of teaching everyday activities through imitation. We also have a group of findings which role in the literature is situated on the border between the adults' entertainment and children's play. Various types of board games, dice and playing cards today leave many issues open to interpretation. However, the items used for games are often difficult to be considered as toys. Many specimens are characterized by high precision of artisanship, such as a complexly ornamented knucklebone² from Wrocław found at 10-11 Węzienna Street (Borkowski 1999: 189). The analysis of the findings indicates a high demand for such products, which is confirmed by the discovery at Site 2 in Gdańsk of traces of

² A bone disc ornamented with a popular motif of circles and points. The surface was divided by two carved circles, between which there were 25 spots. Each spot consisted of a point within a small circle. Inside the smaller ring, in the central part of the disc there were twelve more spots divided into four groups. An additional spot is in the very centre of the disc. The discs were probably made with the use of lathe, while the carvings with the use of a compass.

specialized turners' activity, in the form of a residue of an independent workshop that produced knucklebones (Cnotliwy 1973: 238–239). However, the most important argument is the nature of such games during the Middle Ages. Although the ability to play chess was considered a measure of wit and intellect, and was one of the qualities of a good knight, it was classified as gambling (Giżycki 1960: 29). One of the reasons for condemning gambling was the fact that money was at stake, and above all the fact that it was not earned through hard work. Such games were mentioned in a number of legal acts primarily by listing the penalties for playing them³. Popular mediaeval gambling games included, among others, the game of draughts and its variations such as Nine Men's Morris or backgammon, but the most popular is considered to be the game of dice.⁴ The importance of the nature of gambling in the case of dice is raised by the findings and records related to frauds, such as repeating the same number of points on two sides of a die.⁵

The obtained picture of gambling shows that in addition to being courtly entertainment (especially in the case of chess), they were also destructive in nature, often accompanied by drinking, cheating, fighting and theft. The games were also played in such places as taverns, markets, bazaars and other public places available for children, who during the day constantly accompanied the adults. Children must have been exposed to this type of games, even though the sources do not explicitly confirm their active participation. They were lawfully prohibited not only from gambling, but also from playing such games in their own homes (Jelicz 1966: 158). Despite this, figures, pawns and dice are most often found in homes or in their neighbourhood, which proves the popularity of such games not only as an entertainment in public places but also as part of everyday life at home. At sites where children's toys were discovered, we often find the elements of gambling games. Taking the information from written and iconographic sources into account, we can interpret this phenomenon as a manifestation of common leisure activities of adults and children, while maintaining the awareness of the need to protect children from the destructive nature of such games. The youngest social group mentioned in the sources as players are the university

³ Compare the Statutes of Casimir the Great from 1342, Wiślica Statute from 1347, Łaski's and Herburt's Statutes from the 16th century, the Lateran Council of 1215, the Council of Kalisz and the Council of Plock in 1398.

⁴ Probably they were often used not only in the classic game of dice, but were an element of various games, such as chess, draughts and gambling games, in which the outcome of the roll determined the possibility of movement on the board.

⁵ An example of a die where the same number of points was repeated is the specimen from the site in Drewniana Street in Wrocław. There were two sides of the die worth four points and no side worth five (Szczeptańczyk 1986: 110–116). Also in one of Hieronim Bosch's paintings we can see a falsified dice with two sides worth four points, used by the condemned in Hell (around 1450–1516). Along with the die, there are also playing cards and a board for the game of backgammon (Borkowski 1999: 201).

students, to whom these words were addressed: 'be vigilant not when playing a game of chess, but explore the issues of physics' (Piwowarczyk 2000: 160). There were also clerics, who are mentioned in the record from 1445 about the parson from Czarnków, who caught them playing cards at school (Geremek ed. 1997: 521). However, in the latter case, we are not able to determine the age of the players due to the variety of age groups in schools. Already in the 12th century, John of Salisbury said that parents should set an example for their children as regards playing gambling games. The Bishop of Chartres pointed out the value of the positive role models and the consequences of the parents' actions, necessary for the proper upbringing of children (Stempin 2010: 47).

So to what degree could the child be in contact with gambling games in the Middle Ages? The iconography provides us with a partial answer, because some of the few known so far pictures of children playing board games come from the same source – *Libros de acedrex, dados e tablas* (*Book of games*), written at the request of Alfonso X of Castile in 1283. Among dozens of miniatures showing players and game development, there are only six illustrations depicting children. In all of them the same theme is repeated – the game is taught to both girls and boys by adults. Except for one illustration showing an adult and a child playing a game, in all the other ones we can notice the recurring theme – two children playing, with adults who stand behind them, holding one hand on the child's shoulder, the other pointing at the board (Fig. 7). All illustrations depict the lessons of chess, only one presents the game of backgammon in the same manner. Board games, especially chess, were an important part of the learning process in the court culture. 'At least since the turn of 11th and 12th century [the game of chess] is one of the regular educational courses commonly recommended and practiced' (Stempin 2010: 48). The games taught children the rules of fighting, working on a strategy and anticipating dangers, the skills that were to be used in real situations. Games were also taught to young girls who could later use the skills in adult life. R. Bubczyk cites the example of *Daurel et Beton*, a romance from the 12th century, in which the main character plays chess at the age of seven and gives all of his earnings to poor children (Bubczyk 2005: 21). This way he was supposed to learn about the positive aspects of playing gambling games. Thanks to such sources we can now see the picture of children participating in pastime activities and games for adults, who knowingly used them to enhance the learning outcomes. It cannot

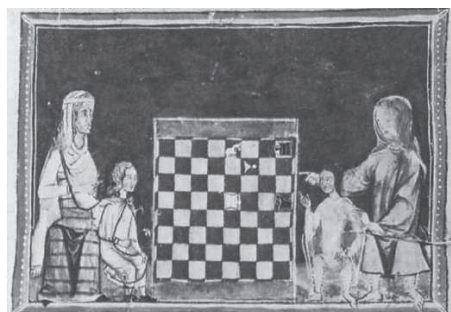


Fig. 7. Teaching children to play chess, detail from *Book of games* commissioned by Alfonso X, 13th century

be ruled out that this situation applied especially to the courts, focused on teaching the virtues and more sophisticated skills than it was necessary for an average person. Perhaps the children quite often watched and then repeated the rules of the gambling games. But we need to appreciate the awareness of the need to properly use those rules for the protection of the child against the destructive nature of games.

The analysis conducted here presents only an outline of the possibilities for interpreting the toys and other historical relics attributed to childhood. In a multithreaded discussion on the role of a child in a mediaeval society, archaeology has at its disposal a much greater range of materials than the anthropological data. The topic of the role toys played in mediaeval childhood has a huge potential, providing new opportunities for understanding not only of the life of children, but also of adults. That period was the one in which we can see the highest extent to which toys reflect surrounded the young. The toys reflect the changes not only in the material culture but also in foreign influences, social diversity, as well as economic and political situation. Above all, the toys shed a new light on the understanding of childhood in the Middle Ages. They show a picture of a child who is a constant companion for the adults. The child does not yet have many skills or special rights, but the people around it are its guides. The adults control its ways of exploring the world, teaching it the skills necessary in everyday life and future professions, protecting it at the same time from the negative influences of the society. The analysis of children's toys indicates that parents consciously guided the development of the child so as to ensure its successful transformation into a fully-fledged member of the society. This is where we can find the roots of the formation of the toy canon in the Middle Ages, based on the steady mental, manual and social development of the child.

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