

# The Archaeology of Play Things: Theorising a Toy Stage in the ‘Biography’ of Objects

*Sally Crawford*

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## **Abstract**

Toys – objects that we can recognise and confidently assert were toys, either through specific association with children, or through comparison with objects that we ‘know’ were toys in other periods – are absent in the settlement archaeology of most pre- and proto-historic periods. There is good reason to argue that children played with things, so why is it so difficult for archaeologists to recognise things that children played with? This paper argues that being a ‘toy’ is a potential characteristic of all objects within a child’s environment, and that this transient ‘toy’ stage is not irrecoverable and invisible in archaeological terms if the role of children in the depositional pathway of objects into the archaeological record is reassessed within a child-centred theoretical framework.

*Keywords:* ARCHAEOLOGY, TOY, SETTLEMENT, OBJECT, PLAY

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## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The Anglo-Saxon settlement site of Mucking, Essex, was inhabited from the first half of the fifth to the beginning of the eighth century AD (Hamerow 1993). The site was subject to open area excavation in the late 1960s to mid 1970s, and the published excavation results reveal one of the most extensive Early Anglo-Saxon settlements excavated to date, consisting of a complex of at least 203 sunken featured buildings, twenty-seven pits, fifty-three timber-built halls, ditches, trackways and two associated cemeteries. The cemeteries contained the remains of not less than 867 people, some of whom died in childhood, but all of whom, if they had survived the first few years of life, would have passed through the childhood stage, and may well have experienced

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*Author’s address:* **Sally Crawford**, Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford, 36 Beaumont Street, Oxford OX1 2PG, UK, Email: sally.crawford@arch.ox.ac.uk

that childhood in the Anglo-Saxon village by which they were eventually buried. In the course of its existence, Mucking was home for hundreds of children.

What evidence for the presence of children and their material culture is contained within the site's archaeological record? Of all the thousands of pottery fragments, worked animal bone, metalwork, glass, beads and other materials from the site, the excavation report assigns not one single object to child use, much less suggesting that any child was involved in the site formation process. The settlement of Mucking is not unique in this respect – rather the opposite: an archaeologist would be hard pressed to identify a single toy from any of the hundreds of known and excavated Anglo-Saxon settlements of this period, and this assertion may be extended to cover the majority of pre- and proto-historic cultures (Kamp 2001).

Material culture is arguably a fundamental aspect of the construct of a childhood (Cunningham 1995; Sofaer Derevenski 2000, 5). Children's experience of being young may be defined by their material environment and their interaction with that environment. It is not a new idea that children are active in both the production and manipulation of material culture (Baxter 2005; Politis 2005; Schwartzman 2008; Sofaer Derevenski 2000). So why is children's material culture so frequently missing from the archaeological record? The case has been made that Anglo-Saxon children's toys, for example, may have been constructed from organic substances which will not survive archaeologically (Crawford 2000, 174). This may be true, but can we really assert that the children at Mucking never played with anything but soft organic materials? Perhaps children in the past did not play with toys? But play, including object play, has been described as a 'true cultural universal' (Hughes 1999, especially 43–57). Play is a central aspect of childhood across cultures and time (Bloch and Pelligrini 1989), and extends to other species (Power 2000, 104). The certainty is that Anglo-Saxon children did play, and incorporated artefacts into their games. The simplest explanation for the lack of toys at settlements such as Mucking is not that there were no toys, or that their toys have not survived in the archaeological record, but that archaeologists are not able to recognise them.

The case for assuming children in the past had toys, even when archaeologists have failed to find them, is strong. Toys play a particularly prominent role in the construct of a childhood that is significantly separated from an adult experience (Baxter 2005, 62; Schwartzman 1976 ; Sofaer Derevenski 2000, 5). Toys represent play, and without an experience of play, the boundaries separating the child from other age groups become blurred (Cunningham 1995; Filipovic 1994; Sofaer Derevenski 2000, 5). Play is, *par excellence*, the defining activity of childhood, and toys are the defining artefacts that encapsulate the difference between 'childhood' and 'adulthood' (Baxter 2005, 62). The presence of toys in the past reassures us that children had 'childhoods', and the action of play reinforces the child's place in the world to such an extent that the apparent absence of toys from the archaeology of some periods has led to the assertion that children in them lacked a distinctive material culture (McLaren 2004; Sofaer Derevenski 2000, 6–7).

Recent discussions of the materiality of culture have argued that there is a dynamic and important relationship between objects, people, and culture (Appadurai 1986; DeMarrais 2004; Gosden and Marshall 1999); understanding what happens to objects

during the period from their creation to their final dissolution (the 'social life' of things) is an important tool in culture explanation (DeMarrais 2004, 11; Earle 2004, 168; Renfrew 2004, 25). In particular, interaction with everyday materiality is key to the ways in which people create, affirm, enact and evolve their social and cultural identities (Gilchrist 2004, 149; Hacking 1995; Hamilakis *et al.* 2002). What happens to individual artefacts – the 'life course' of objects – is relevant in terms of the people with whom things interact: "'Things" are distinguished one from another by their pedigrees of possession and by their "experiences" which have significance and meaning *for the persons who engage with them*' (Renfrew 2004, 25; my italics). Toys are given significance and meaning by the children who play with them. Given that children engaged with material culture in object play, it is imperative to identify their toys in the past if children's culture, and its relationship with adult culture, is to be understood.

## Children and the Archaeological Record

The tendency of archaeologists to miss 'child-culture' is not a new observation, and it was famously demonstrated in the 1973 publication of the 'Millie's Camp' experiment in archaeology (Bonnichsen 1973). This excavation of a contemporary Indian camp site underlined not only that children do not necessarily respect adult interpretations of the purpose of an object, but that archaeologists are not programmed to recognise the different perspective (culture) that children have, unconstrained, as Julie Wileman (2005, 28) noted, by what adults consider suitable or appropriate. Children have their own agenda (Wilkie 2000a). The last few decades have produced a significant body of ethnographical observation (e.g. Deal 1985; Politis 2005; Rossie 2003; Schwartzman 1976) and experimental archaeology (Baxter 2005; Hammond and Hammond 1981; Wilk and Schiffer 1979) which confirm beyond doubt that current definitions of 'toys' are problematic; that children were producers as well as consumers of material culture; and that children's play activities will have an impact on site formation (Lillehammer 1989; Politis 2005; Sofaer Derevenski 2000).

Given several decades over which childhood archaeologists and anthropologists have asserted that children have an impact on archaeological deposits, and even that the way children engage with play-objects varies across cultures (Schwartzman 1986), why then is evidence for children's play still generally absent in mainstream discussions and analyses of sites such as Mucking, Essex? Childhood is just one of several perspectives – homosexual, pacifist, physically impaired, vegetarian – rarely engaged with because the evidence is difficult, but part of the answer may lie in the way in which site formation is assumed to be a record of adult cultural behaviours, so that any input from children then becomes a distortion of the 'proper' record. As Mary Lewis (2007, 9) has argued, 'child activity ... has been seen as detracting from the real issues of adult behaviour', not least because children's play is not relevant to the broader study of society – its political, religious and economic structures, for example – on the basis of its archaeological record, because toys belong to a world that is specifically not part of the adult world: 'children, rather than adults, ought to use toys' (Sofaer Derevenski 2000, 4). The interaction of children's play activities – 'a repertoire of behaviours in which they are the only or primary actors', as Jane Eva Baxter (2005,

62) puts it – with the archaeological record is not of primary interest and importance in most archaeological reports. In the site report on the early Anglo-Saxon settlement at Mucking, Essex, for example, artefacts are categorised largely according to the (implicit adult) function for which it is presumed they were made – ‘spinning and weaving equipment’; ‘articles of dress’; ‘weapons’; ‘vessels’, and this approach is replicated in the discussion of the ‘diverse activities’ taking place on the site, including baking, quarrying, lead and antler working and weaving (Hamerow 1993, 15). Explanations for the distribution and nature of the material recovered from the site are provided in terms of *in situ* work, refuse, abandonment, dumping and accidental loss, but are not related to play at all, and in this, the report at Mucking does not differ from any of the many other site reports for this and other periods.

Jo Sofaer Derevenski (2000, 7) has noted that the identification of objects as playthings in fact only serves to move them away from the mainstream discussion of the other artefacts into a different (lesser, marginal) status: ‘its identification as a toy relegates the significance of the artefact to the level of a curiosity’.

It is hardly surprising, in this context, that archaeologists of childhood have sought to rescue children from their socially-weak role as users of toys by emphasising their complex interactions at other levels of materiality – by demonstrating the learning value of their interactions with material culture (Park 1998), or their roles as producers and workers – in flint-knapping, weaving and potting, for example (Finlay 1997; Greenfield 2000; Smith 2008). This approach, drawing attention to children in economic and social terms in the archaeological assessment of the past, is useful in raising the profile of children and material culture, but it also privileges one culture (adult) over another (child) because it does not reflect children’s playful interaction with, and manipulation of, their environment: such prejudicial focus on dominant cultures within archaeological interpretation is not unique to childhood studies (Wilkie 2000b).

## Conventional Categories for Separating Toys from other Artefacts

Part of the problem in finding toys in the archaeological record lies in the levels of proof demanded to demonstrate that any artefact was a toy rather than fulfilling some other (adult) function, though this burden of proof is not equal across cultural groups. ‘Why should this be interpreted as a child-use object?’ is currently a legitimate and necessary question to ask of any proposed play-object, whereas the corollary – ‘why is this an adult-use object?’ is not posed of artefacts such as, for example, loom weights, pottery fragments or bone combs. In practice (even if the practice is not articulated), the whole corpus of material culture, in relation to children, is divided into three groups. These are structured by the prevailing ‘need’ to prove children’s presence in engaging with artefacts, in contrast to the default assumption that artefacts belong to the adult world unless proven otherwise. Group 1 contains those artefacts which archaeologists can agree were toys; Group 2 contains those artefacts which might have been toys, based on analogy (with Group 1 artefacts) or a child-related context, and Group 3 is the default category, containing all those objects which cannot be connected with children’s play either by analogy or by context.

The most exclusive group, and the group which is conspicuously missing from sev-

eral archaeological cultures, is Group 1: objects which modern observers can agree were toys. These have traditionally been the paramount toys in terms of identification and interpretation. They consist exclusively of items deemed to have been manufactured specifically for the use of children in their games, such as dolls, tops, hoops and rattles. There are very limited circumstances under which objects can be placed in this group. Where literature and art combine to offer images of children actively engaged in playing with artefacts, toys can be recognised, and such manufactured items have been firmly identified as toys in cultures with good historical sources – the Ancient Near East, Greece, Rome and Medieval Europe, for example (Dräffkorn Kilmer 1993; Egan 1996; Forsyth and Egan 2005; Harlow and Laurence 2002, 50–1; Orme 2008, 113). It is noticeable that in the identification of children's toys in past societies there is a correlation between societies with toys and societies with written and illustrative sources. Artefacts from proto- or prehistoric cultures are virtually impossible to place in this group, as are objects from historic periods which are nevertheless not matched by firm documentary or illustrative sources. An object created for a child with the specific intention that the child should play with it may, where there is corroborative illustrative evidence that children were playing with it, be securely classed as a toy in this group. The miniature items associated with children in Inuit cultures have been demonstrated to be children's objects rather than ritual items or votive artefacts by anthropological parallel (Park 1998).

The debates over whether Inuit miniatures are really 'toys', or are teaching tools intended to educate children, however, highlights a problem with defining Group 1 artefacts as objects created with the specific intention that children should play with them. Perhaps it would be more accurate to suggest that Group 1 artefacts are those made specifically for children to spend time using in a way that was intended to engage their attention and allow them to express and explore the environment through the manipulation of artefacts that were not intended for adult use. Such a convoluted definition probably just allows us to exclude such child-intended creations as school books, cradles and clothing toggles from Group 1 (though this does not mean to say that such items might not also have functioned as toys, a point I will return to later). Group 1 objects, however, cannot, by their restricted definition, be assumed to encompass all toys actually made for and played with by children: Group 1 objects only include ones that archaeologists can recognise and agree as such.

The second, and slightly larger group of artefacts, are those for which a case could be made that they might be toys, but there cannot be certainty: context is the key to interpretation in this group. Group 2 items are particularly predominant in pre- and proto-historic archaeological records. Examples might be miniatures and other artefacts which bear a resemblance to Group 1 items from other periods, or which are associated with children in the archaeological record, but for which there is no firm evidence to prove that these were toys, even if they have an association with children. Miniatures figure prominently in this section because there are plentiful sources from periods with illustrative material showing children engaged in play with miniature versions of tools, people and animals (Forsyth and Egan 2005; Park 1998). Not unreasonably, then, miniature versions of artefacts found in the archaeological record have been identified as children's playthings. The small chalk rock carved into the shape of a pig

dated to c. 1000–450 BC and buried with an infant within sight of Stonehenge (Pollard and Garwood 2008); the miniature wooden horses from Viking contexts (McAlister 2008, 319–25) or the small tweezers and combs found in early Anglo-Saxon cremation urns, have all been posited as possible toys (Crawford 1999, 141). Use of miniatures, however, is not restricted to children. A small object may be a toy, but then again, it may be a miniature intended for adult use, or intended to symbolise adult interests or purposes. The excavators of the Iron Age rock-pig wisely hedged their bets about whether it was a toy, or of ritual significance (Pollard and Garwood 2008). Anglo-Saxon miniature combs and tweezers were almost certainly items of mortuary significance and not associated with children or childhood at all (Crawford 1999, 143; Williams 2003). The use of miniature figures as votive items, even if deployed by adults in a child-centred context, is well attested in many cultures, to the extent that miniatures once assumed to be toys have been reinterpreted as ritual figurines. Examples include the fifth to fourth-century-BC terracotta figurines from Athens, once described as dolls, and the clay figures from Egyptian Middle Kingdom Lahun/Kahun, now regarded as votive artefacts (Ammerman 2007; Quirke 1998; Reilly 1997). The possibility that any miniature artefact found in an archaeological context, even when associated with children, had adult, non-toy functions, has to be given serious consideration (McLaren 2004, 301; Sofaer Derevenski 2000, 7).

Objects which cannot be classified, on an evidential basis, as either Group 1 (definite toy), or Group 2 (possible toy) artefacts, belong to Group 3. The bulk of all archaeological artefacts currently fall into this group: it is the default category for all objects unless there are specific reasons – association with children, odd location, analogy – for moving the object out of this group. Discussions of artefacts in this group rarely acknowledge any child agency in their use or deposition, though recent considerations of small or inexpertly-formed ancient tools have posited child labour in the manufacture and use of tools (e.g. Finlay 1997; Greenfield 2000).

Anthropologists have suggested that children's play can be divided into two kinds: adult-structured play, in which the adult supplies the toys and the children are guided in play conforming to adult agendas, and child-structured play, in which children's play and toys are created by the child, independently of adults (Baxter 2005; Schwartzman 1976). As Jane Eva Baxter (2005, 63) notes, child-structured play is 'less visible archaeologically because child-structured play does not always incorporate artifacts that are identified as toys and occasionally it may fall beyond cultural conventions for the use of social space'. In other words, the criteria outlined and above for the definition of Group 1 or Group 2 'toys' relate to those artefacts that adults, past or present, have labelled toys. They are manufactured, or small, or relatively valueless, and they are to be played with in places designated 'appropriate' by adults. The inevitable consequence of this definition of 'toys' is that the bulk of artefacts that children actually played with – almost the entire material culture of children's physical or imaginative games – is defined as being absent from the archaeological record of some periods because their 'toys' *cannot* fulfil our definition of 'toys'. The current archaeological approach to defining a toy makes any progress in discussing children's playthings in the past difficult: as Ken. and Diana Wardle (2007, 29) asserted in their article arguing for child agency in the deposition of a cache of material at Assiros Toumba, Macedonia: 'either



there were no children in antiquity, or many objects, utilitarian or otherwise, were, or became, children's playthings'.

## Transforming Objects into Playthings

Ask an eight-year old what a 'toy' is, and they will reply that it is 'anything I play with'.<sup>2</sup> The Anglo-Saxon King Alfred, supplementing his translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* with a typical Alfredian anecdote drawn from his own experience, was well aware of children's tendencies to appropriate and transform adult artefacts into toys: 'we even warn our children from playing with our money' (Sweet 1871, 391). What ethnographic observation and experimental archaeology have made clear is that the current 'very narrow conceptions of ... toys' (Garwood 2007, 65) found in excavation reports and summarised in the groupings discussed above serve to exclude children from the majority of material culture, because they do not take into account the possibility that 'toys' are not necessarily restricted to items made specifically for child-use. The intellectual and theoretical exploration of the child's use of objects for play – the recognition of childish things – is currently blocked by the construct which argues that there is separation between adult-user or 'non-toy objects' (Group 3) from those that were child-user artefacts: 'toys' (Group 1 and possibly Group 2). Both the modern eight-year old and the ninth-century English King articulate the true nature of a toy, as a fluid, context-related *concept*, rather than an object, which makes current attempts to classify objects as toys on the basis of their shape, size, cost or assumed function redundant.

By categorising toys with reference to adult constraints and perceptions of 'toyness', I would suggest that we are attempting to organise child-world into an inappropriate adult-world. It is the equivalent of assuming that childhood ends at fifteen years, then claiming that the Early Anglo-Saxons did not differentiate between adults and children in the burial ritual because 12-year olds were buried with adult artefacts: by forcing an inappropriate set of requirements (fifteen years as the threshold of childhood) on an Early Anglo-Saxon mortuary ritual, the actual transitional age of 10–12 years signalled by the burial evidence would be (and indeed was) missed (Crawford 1991). In the same way, we are not going to find child-structured play in the archaeological record while we impose our ideas of 'toy' (that which conforms to adult-structured play criteria) from non-toy (everything else in the archaeological record).

Fundamental to the recognition of (child-structured) toys in archaeological records is the need to realise that a 'toy' is not a single-function object, unified and static within a defined 'toy' category. It is an often-articulated idea that childhood is characterised by its fluidity, physical and mental. Children grow and change from birth to the points at which they are incorporated into the adult world, and their ability to engage with, and manipulate, the objects around them, physically and mentally, also changes. As children develop, they incorporate, transform and dispose of the material culture with which they come into contact in different ways and for variable periods. Through child agency, an object can be transformed into a toy for periods of time ranging from the whole use-life of an object, for a few moments, or on a repeated basis. Identifying artefacts as 'toys' will inevitably be bogged down in a quagmire of difficulties and

problems if the approach is through the 'purpose' of the toy – is a toy designed to educate a child the same as a toy used for 'play'? Is a child, imitating adult behaviours – using a wooden spoon to mix a cake batter, for example – using the object as a toy, or as a tool? Are miniature artefacts media for inculcating children into the adult world, and therefore adult tools rather than children's toys (Barthes 1972; Park 1998)? These questions miss the important aspect of the agency of the child in the use and manipulation of its own, separate domain: child object-play.

The impact of the child's act of appropriation and transformation may be slight and archaeologically invisible in terms of the trajectory of an artefact's life course – a brooch will continue to be viewed by adults as a brooch, even if a child has temporarily appropriated it into a game. Nonetheless, contact with a child moves the object, however briefly, into a new and different set of object classification and relationship with human users. Does it matter that the interpreters and users of the object are children?

## Depositional Pathways

An object may come to children through different routes: it may have been given directly to the child by an adult; it may have been abandoned by adults and retrieved by children; it may have been abandoned by adults directly into children's hands; the action of children upon an object (damaging it, for example) may have precipitated its separation from the adult world; or natural artefacts (sticks, stones) may be incorporated into children's games without ever intersecting with the adult world. One important aspect of children's play with materials in their natural and human environment, which has been highlighted by experimental archaeology and needs further evaluation, is the extent to which objects enter a stage of use as a toy at the *end point* of use in the adult world, and prior to final abandonment. A broken, worn, or unvalued object may be deliberately passed on to a child: in this sense, children may function in the biography of an object as a temporary or transitional phase in the deposition process. By allowing an object to be played with by a child when it has reached the end of its use in the adult domain, the object has been, to all intents and purposes, permanently removed from the domain of the adult community as effectively as if it had been thrown down a well. Furthermore, objects which have been removed from circulation by adults in other ways – by being placed in a midden, for example – may be retrieved from their place of removal from the adult world by children and transformed, physically, imaginatively or both, into a phase of being a toy, before final abandonment by the child (Rossie 2003, 5). No theoretical discussion of the depositional pathways of objects into the archaeological record has yet taken into consideration the possible impact of child-use as an end-stage in the pre-depositional life cycle of objects.

How many of the objects retrieved from archaeological settlement deposits will have passed through a child's hands as a final stage in their biography? Artefacts archaeologists conventionally acknowledge as toys – Group 1 artefacts and probably some Group 2 artefacts, such as hoops, dolls, miniature carts, clay horses and teddy bears – all fall into this category, and might seem to be the obvious artefacts to have been deposited by children. Even in this most child-centred group of artefacts, however, items will have biographies that transform their purpose from being child-centred to



adult-centred at some point in their lives. Even the boundaries of 'Group 1' artefacts are not fixed and are based on user-interpretations of the object, rather than on some inherent object-function. The most common transition is from child-toy to curated object of memory. Artefacts made to be toys may turn into relics or memorials to childhoods, and, as such, become part of the material culture of the adult world. In some cultures, however, children's artefacts may be appropriated by adults for non-child related purposes. Toys may have value in the adult world as collectors' items, or toys may be appropriated as substitutes for votive offerings, for example (Sillar 1996). From being 'toys' – objects with a function as children's playthings, whether as deliberate, intentional toys, or as items appropriated by children and therefore endowed with resonances of childhood – objects may instead become symbols of remembrance, retained by adults associated with the child, or by the child-become-adult, to remember, create, or promote a lost (because now in the past) childhood. Such objects represent a curated expression of an individual or social memory of childhood, and this may be the last stage of the object's life-cycle. Even objects which were created with the intention of being toys may not *be* toys at all or, indeed, at any stage of their use.

Objects which were not primarily intended for child use may yet enter the child domain temporarily, fleetingly, repetitively, more permanently or in parallel with the adult world. The transference of the object to the child domain may involve no transformations at all – children using adult objects the way adults use them, in imitation of adult behaviour, would be an obvious example. The extent to which they are toys depends largely on the extent to which the child's use of the object is incorporated into the adult domain – is the child effectively conforming to adult uses of the artefact? Children have been described as 'plural beings' in the sense that they embody multiple identities in terms of their present, past and future potentiality within the adult domain (Mizoguchi 2000), but their pluralism extends to their co-existence within a separate, child-centred domain. Objects, when manipulated by children, also have a plural identity, carrying concurrent meanings for different readers of the object. A spoon used by a child to eat its food is not a toy until it is transformed – imaginatively and non-physically, or by re-posturing the artefact for imaginative play in a way that takes it outside the adult domain, and at one and the same time it inhabits both the child's and the adult's domain. A table may be functioning as a table for an adult, while for a child it is imaginatively reconfigured into a den. In such circumstances, the trajectory of the object's life cycle will be dominated by its role within the adult domain, which is likely to remain paramount.

Unmodified objects, such as sticks, pebbles, animal bones and shells, become toys as they are collected and used by children. Most such objects will be removed from the social world by the children who incorporated them into it, and their depositional pathways – how natural objects enter the archaeological record – will be determined by the child who deposited them. The most likely archaeological evidence that such natural items were ever incorporated into children's play, should any hint survive at all, will be in their location and in their unnatural proximity to other objects. The action of children upon such objects, however, may imbue the stone, twig or shell with new value in the adult world, not for the item itself, but for the association between the item and the child, and may thus be curated into the adult world, either as a personal

memorial of the adult who was once the child, or as a memory for associated adults, such as parents. By contrast, other unmodified objects may enter the adult world and be kept separate from children: ritual stones, shells or other natural items may be rendered sacred and untouchable, so that children (and other groups within society) are never allowed to act upon the item.

Some objects, whether derived from the natural or human environment, will be kept separate from specific sections of society, and this excluded group may include children. Separated objects may be kept apart for a range of reasons relating to value, fragility and ritual purposes. Children will be specifically prevented from coming into contact with, or playing with, artefacts dedicated to the adult phase of the life course in societies where the right to use and manipulate artefacts is connected to age and age-class rules and taboos which children would transgress.

## Identifying Play-related Object Deposition

Recognising that all objects have 'toy' potentiality is one thing: recognising which objects ever had a toy stage in terms of the archaeological record is arguably beyond archaeological limits. Even if it is accepted that objects have a potential stage as toys in their life course, can this ever be recognised in the archaeological record?

The agency of children in collecting and depositing material may have a significant impact on the nature of deposited assemblages. Ken and Diana Wardle's (2007) assertion that children collect, curate and assemble materials, particularly material for which adults have no further use, in a way which may be significantly different from adult assemblages, is particularly relevant, and the taxonomy of child deposition practices, both in terms of location and shape of hiding place, requires further consideration. Children's access to their environment differs from that of adults, both because of social conventions (children may be excluded from some areas) and because of physical attributes (children's size prevents them from accessing some areas, but allows them to access spaces too small for adults), and their strength and different access to resources (shovels, spades), relative to adults, could determine the size and shape of any pit and the type of soil into which a pit could be dug.

The issue of child agency in the removal of objects from adult circulation and in the re-use of objects which have reached the end of their life-cycle in adult terms may be particularly relevant as a factor in the distribution and deposition of incomplete objects. John Chapman (2000) and Helena Hamerow (2006), for example, have both discussed the presence of fragmented artefacts, particularly pottery, in prehistoric and Early Medieval settlement contexts respectively. Both have, rightly, drawn attention to the possibility that the distribution of co-joining sherds of pottery may represent structured or deliberate deposits rather than casual disposal of rubbish (though neither considered the possibility of child agency in the placing of such deposits). Attention has rightly been drawn to the possibly different 'use-lives' of fragments from single pots, but the possible role of children in the distribution and deposition of fragments and in the transformation of fragments into toys has not been given any consideration in mainstream academic study of the deposition of broken objects (see Chapman 2000). In part, this is because archaeological discussion of structured deposition assumes

adult agency, and also because, in the case of some of the prehistoric and Anglo-Saxon deposits, whole or partial remains of fragmentary animal and human bodies were present in the assemblages.

Is there a good reason for excluding children from the creation of structured deposits and from deposition involving animal and human remains? Rituals involve the repeated and ceremonial observance of prescribed sequences of behaviour, and there is no logical reason for arguing that children, as part of their play, may not create, enact, pass on to other children and perform rituals which may run in parallel with, or be separate from, the adult world. 'The ritual process', argued Maurice Bloch (2005, 21), 'is always focused on a special type of substitution, where one thing "becomes" another, in the same way as wine becomes the blood of Christ during the mass'. In this sense, children are the pre-eminent enactors of ritual, constantly translating and redefining the adult properties and meanings of things into toys through imaginative and physical reposturing and enactment. Nor is there any evidential reason to insist that the manipulation and deposition of human or animal material precluded child agency in past societies, or indeed in the present.

That children's object-play, involving retrieving, transforming, collecting, curating and depositing artefacts, may be responsible for a percentage of settlement archaeology, may be a theoretical possibility, but can such a theory be applied to practical datasets? Material retrieved from the Anglo-Saxon sunken-featured buildings at Mucking, Essex, typically included fragments of animal bone, pottery, spindle whorls and metalwork. In their eclectic nature, there is nothing about these retrieved collections to confirm or negate the possibility of child's play. However, one characteristic of the material from the 212 settlement hollows at the site is the high percentage of material with holes or piercings, including fifty-one sherds of pottery with complete lugs or piercings (though Anglo-Saxon pottery vessels are not predominantly lugged or pierced), twenty-six beads, fifty-six loom weights or spindles, twenty-seven metal loops or fragments with holes and two worked horns with holes. In total, 102 of the sunken-featured buildings included a fragmentary item with a hole or piercing, and this total does not include partial lugs and piercings which may have been complete at the time of deposition. Pierced items drew particular attention in the site report for the contemporary Anglo-Saxon settlement at West Stow, Suffolk, where it was noted that 'no function can be put forward for the twelve bones pierced either in the centre of the shaft or at the distal end' (West 1985, 125). Some of these pierced bones are exactly comparable to 'buzz bones' found in Viking contexts and are functionally related to the pierced discs found in ancient and modern contexts throughout Europe and beyond and used by children (McAlister 2008, 308; Van Beek 1989). Though there has been some discussion as to the use of buzz bones as musical instruments and in relation to ritual activity, Medieval examples have been found in direct association with children (McAlister 2008, 309). If the identification of the pierced bones at West Stow as children's buzz bones is accepted, then perhaps the other objects found in association with the buzz bones might also be more readily explained in terms of child's play. Three of the West Stow pierced bones were found in the pit of sunken-featured building (SFB) 47, which also included a Romano-British pottery base, pierced, and a flat bone strip with ring and dot ornament and two holes. Another was found close by in Hall 5, where the

associated artefacts also included a bronze strip with two pierced holes, as well as a very worn bone disc or bead. A further pierced bone was found in SFB 37, also in the same area, where associated objects included four clay loom weights, a Mesolithic quartzite macehead with an hour-glass perforation, a shale spindle-whorl and two glass beads. Given the presence of the putative buzz bone in these three dwellings, the associated artefacts begin to appear less like random or 'special' (adult) deposits, and take on the characteristics of items collected by child agency. Holes in objects allow them to be strung and whirled, and, by analogy with the West Stow material, the preponderance of pottery, metal and other fragments of objects which included piercings or loops at Mucking offers the possibility of a child-centred explanation for the collection and deposition of some of the material culture on this site. These are tentative explanations, but even so, sensitivity to the role of children in collecting, retrieving and depositing used, worn and fragmentary artefacts which were transformed into play-objects at least allows a nuanced interpretation for the deposition of artefacts in the archaeological record. We cannot assert that any of the games played by the many Anglo-Saxon children who lived at West Stow or Mucking were responsible for the presence of the pierced bones, beads, spindle whorls, Roman pottery and Mesolithic artefacts found in the pits and buildings at these sites, but we can begin to explore the possibility that they were.

## Conclusion

'Toys' cannot materialise in the evidence until the question of the toy-use of objects is rephrased and a number of fundamental aspects in the life-course of 'objects-as-toys' are accepted. The first and most important is that, as King Alfred noticed, children transform objects into toys when they play with them, whether the object is designed specifically for children to play with or not (Rossie 2003). The obvious corollary of this proposition is that not all objects which were actually played with by children (and became toys for the duration of that play) may have been intended for child-use. In addition, not all playthings, even when originally built or designed specifically for child's play, need necessarily have been restricted to child use in the course of the object's life. 'Toy', like childhood itself, is a potentially transient state in all objects within a child's environment, and this transient state is irrecoverable and invisible in archaeological terms. Between creation and final deposition, artefacts may be put to a variety of uses; they have a biography which reflects, in important ways, the culture in which the object was used and from which it was finally removed (the 'death' of the object; Gosden and Marshall 1999). Identifying the agents involved in the use and final deposition of artefacts into the archaeological record is central to material-culture history and archaeological interpretation (Johnson 1989). This article proposes that, with rare exceptions, *all* objects have and had the potential to be used by children as toys: that being a toy, toy-use, or toy-ness, represents a variable but possible proportion in the life-cycle of any object; that the 'toy-ness' of things has a direct impact on the processes by which artefacts are deposited in the archaeological record; and that the impact of children's transformation of objects into toys as the final stage in their use, and the relationship between this use and final deposition, may considerable.

The challenge now for the archaeologist is to identify the extent to which any artefact, regardless of 'normal' adult-appropriation of the object, functioned as a toy; the extent to which it was functioning as a toy at the moment of its entry into the archaeological record and indeed, whether it was because it had been used as a toy that it entered the archaeological record.

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## Notes

1. This paper was inspired by a number of papers delivered at the first two meetings of the Society for the Study of Childhood in the Past. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Dawn Hadley, whose penetrating observations about the burden of proof on archaeologists to demonstrate that artefacts were toys, rather than on proving that they were not toys, was the starting point for this paper. My thanks to Eileen Murphy for encouraging me to persevere with this paper, and to the insightful comments of the anonymous referees.
2. Question answered by E. Randall, aged 8 years. Asked, 'well, is this table a toy?', the reply was 'yes, if I am using it as a den'.

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