WHEN WE WERE VERY YOUNG

AMNH; D. FINNIN

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Archaeologists uncover the traces of childhood.

By Samuel M. Wilson

Among the artifacts left behind by the Iroquois people who lived in southern Ontario in late prehistoric times was a miniature pot made from a lump of clay. A tiny thumb or finger, too small to be a grown-up's, had shaped the inside of the pot, leaving the impression of a tiny fingernail. Archaeologists have also recovered small clay versions of smoking pipes, impractical because they lack holes. These were children's toys—small and ephemeral, easily overlooked in the refuse of the past. Just as male scholars were typically once blind to the presence of women in the archaeological record, grown-up archaeologists often don't look for children in the past.

The inhabitants of Cerén, a Mayan site in western El Salvador, fled in A.D. 595, leaving everything in place—crops in the field, pots of food, their most cherished goods. A nearby volcanic eruption covered the whole settlement with ash. Carefully excavated by archaeologist Payson Sheets

VICTOR ENGLEBERT

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Yanomami boys hunt in the Brazilian rainforest with scaled-down bows and arrows that were probably made by their fathers. Above: A toy used by the Campa of Peru—the stick is jerked so that the dangling turtle skull swings upward, to be caught on the end of the stick. Left: A fruit-pod top, made by the Amahuaca of Peru, has a hole in it to create a humming sound. Bottom left: A Yanomami boy builds a toy airplane.

and his colleagues, this site gives us a remarkable glimpse of life in the Mayan Classic period. One of the houses at Cerén contained a complete inventory of the artifacts of everyday life. Next to an interior doorway, just (in my view) where a kid would sit, was a diminutive pot and a scattering of twenty small shards of pottery. Reporting on these finds, Christian J. Zier remarks (with due scholarly caution) that they "may be the playthings of a child and could indicate that this is a child's room. This statement is tentative at best and will remain so."

In my own excavations in North America and the Caribbean, I have found odds and ends that did not fall into any obvious category: a collection of colored rocks, a few fossilized casts of the inside of shellfish, a half-burned lump of clay with a hole in it, poorly made little arrowheads. Not until I had children and saw their piles of treasure did the finds start to make sense. At times I have come close to throwing away something my children prized, thinking it was a piece of junk, and as an archaeologist I may have done just that with the artifacts of children who lived long ago.

Various unusual things are relegated to the category of "enigmatic finds" and get stuck at the end of archaeological reports. Going over the artifacts from the Israeli site of Tell Jemmeh, Smithsonian archaeologist Gus Van Beek noticed some rounded disks an inch or two across. They were made from pieces of broken pottery and had two holes drilled through them. Earlier archaeologists had taken them for buttons or had simply described them as "perforated disks." But Van Beek saw in them a "buzz," a simple toy he recalled from childhood. To play, you loop string through the two holes and hold one end of the loop in each hand. When the string is wound up and you pull the two ends of the loop apart, the disk in the middle will spin and make a buzzing sound. Van Beek identified archaeological examples of this toy at other sites in the Near East, as well as in Pakistan, India, China, Japan, and Korea. Buzzes have been found in the sites of Native American peoples in North and South America, and even in the remains of British army camps from the Revolutionary War.

Children's toys today include many low-tech items that are common around the world. Rattles, whistles, bull-roarers (a slat of wood tied to the end of a thong and whirled around the head), balls, tops, and buzzes are fun to play with by themselves. There are also the pieces and markers that go along with games. The most common kinds of toys, however, allow children to do things that grownups do, but on a miniature scale: small versions of hunting and fishing gear, model boats, baskets, dolls, pots, and plates.

In his *Laws*, Plato argued that "the man who is to make a good builder must play at building toy houses, and to make a good farmer he must play at tilling land; and those who are rearing them must provide each child with toy tools modeled on real ones" (translation by R. G. Bury). I wonder

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Top: A clay doll made by an Amahuaca girl and carried to help her grow. Above: A doll from the Tikuna of Brazil represented a girl during her puberty ritual. Below: A figurine from a fifth-century Roman infant cemetery was not necessarily a toy.

NOELLE SOREN

whether Plato ever gave a boy or girl an "educational" toy and then watched as the child made a temple to Dionysus out of the box it came in.

In the dry shelters of the Lower Pecos region on the Texas–Mexico border, normally perishable artifacts made of wood, fiber, and leather have been well preserved. Archaeologist Ken Brown studied more than a hundred such artifacts, identifying child-size versions of digging sticks, wood and fiber snares, and netted backpack frames. He sees these as tools for teaching children how to behave and survive in the world and, perhaps, even make a small contribution to the group's quest for food.

LIOR RUBIN

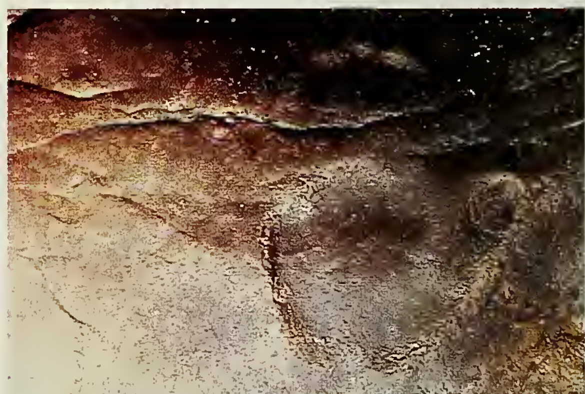
GUS W. VAN BEEK

AMNH; D. FINNIN

An enigmatic artifact, above, recovered from the 4,000-year-old site of Tell Jemmeh in Israel, is a toy known as a buzz. Recent examples equipped with the requisite string, right, are from the Amahuaca, Campa, and Wayana peoples of the Amazonian rainforest. Above, right: A child in Nuweiba el Muzeina in the Egyptian Sinai demonstrates how a buzz is made to whirr. Bottom, right: Some 13,000 years ago, a five- or six-year-old child left this handprint on the ground of the cave of Fontanet in Ariège, France.

In 1879 a famine wiped out the village of Kukulik on Saint Lawrence Island, south of the Bering Strait between Alaska and Siberia. Excavation of the site in the 1930s brought to light an extraordinary range of artifacts made of wood, bone, and other materials. Among the objects were dolls, miniature kayaks, and small carved bears and seals. Similarly, the prehistoric Thule of Canada and Greenland left behind numerous dolls and miniatures of adult artifacts. In a recent study, archaeologist Robert W. Park, of the University of Waterloo, Ontario, compared these to the traditional toys of the Inuit, the Thule's descendants.

A great many archaeologists are justifiably wary of viewing any given miniature artifact as a plaything. Miniature versions of everyday objects can have potent ritual significance. An exhibit at the Idaho State Historical Museum in Boise ("Backtracking: Ancient Art of Southern Idaho") included a number of human figurines identified as possible dolls. Some Shoshone people who visited the exhibit, descendants of makers of the artifacts, saw them as the powerful representations of the supernatural character Nu'-numbi and perhaps taken from a shaman's paraphernalia.



JEAN CLOTTES

Probably the most famous of prehistoric arti-

facts that are thought to be toys are the wheeled dogs and other animals from pre-Conquest tombs in Mexico. They have attracted a lot of attention because they show that ancient Mesoamericans understood the principle of the wheel—even though they put it to no practical application, perhaps because they lacked draft animals and lived in mountainous terrain. Archaeologist Francisco Javier Hernandez argued in an extensive study that these were ritual objects (of now unknown meaning) made to be used in burials. This is probably also the case with the elaborate dioramas buried with Egyptian royalty in the third and fourth millennia B.C., in which miniature figures carried the things people would need in the next world.

The idea that artifacts we identify as toys might once have had deeper meanings connects with the influential argument put forward by French historian Philippe Ariès in his 1960 classic, *Centuries of Childhood*. He contended that the Western conception of childhood as a distinct stage of human development and as a protected time of make-believe and play has emerged only in the past few centuries.

A child's early years would indeed have been different in the past, if only because mortality rates and demographics were generally different. In Roman society, for instance, infant mortality may have been as high as one-third of live births, and half the population was under the age of twenty. Some have argued that in prehistory, and even in recent centuries, parents showed relative indifference toward younger children precisely because so few survived. But burials of children with grave goods show that children were cherished as early as Upper Paleolithic times. At the Russian site of Sungir, for example, a man, a girl, and a boy were buried together with ivory spears, stone tools, small animal carvings, and thousands of beads carved from the tusks of mammoths. The grave dates to about 23,000 years ago. Such deliberate burials became more common during the Upper Paleolithic, and through them, children become more visible in the archaeological record.

ART WOLFE

AMNH: D. FINNIN

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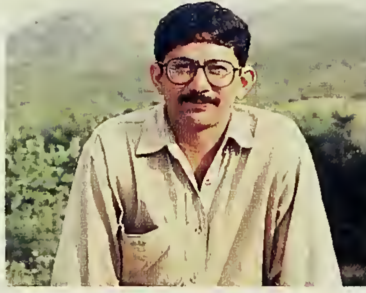
Mayoruna children, left, play in a dugout canoe in Peruvian Amazonia. Top: A toy dugout and paddle from the Karajá of Brazil. Left, below: A girl's apron comes from the Wayana of French Guiana; the miniature version was collected from an unspecified group in Guyana. Below: Fingernail impressions made by a child decorate a tiny clay pot from a prehistoric Iroquois site in southern Ontario.

Although Upper Paleolithic peoples may not have considered childhood to be a carefree and innocent stage of life, they apparently did distinguish it from adulthood and marked the transition through ritual. Some of the painted caves of northern Spain and southwestern France, including the recently discovered caves of the Ardèche in France, preserve footprints of young people. And the cavern called Gargas, in the Pyrenees, has hundreds of handprints stenciled onto the walls—some, judging by their size, the hands of adolescents or children. These traces may have been left by young people at the time of their initiation into adulthood.

An awareness of childhood can contribute to the more general effort, current in archaeology, to look for individuals in prehistory, to trace families and lineages through time and discover what motivated people to behave the way they did. Formerly, archaeologists tended to view past societies as a composite of integrated subsystems—economy, demography, politics, social organization, and so on. By focusing more on individuals and the choices they confronted, we come face to face with the concrete agents of change in human prehistory. In doing so, perhaps we shall even discover that children were among their societies' most important innovators. □

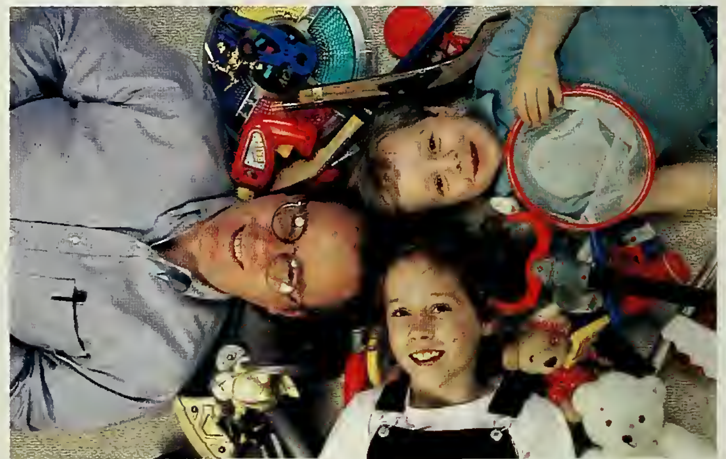
MARTHA A. LATTA AND KEN JONES

Arun Venkataraman ("The Dogged Dhole") grew up in Bombay, but his heart "always lay in the subcontinent's romantic and mysterious forests." A passionate conservationist, he wanted to live and work in wild places, coupling conservation with academic study. He got his wish in 1990: after earning a doctorate (specializing in the social biology of wasps), he went to work in the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary in southern India. There he became intrigued by the dhole—in particular, the evolution of the little-known wild dog's social interactions. He was equally intrigued by the fragile ecosystem inhabited by dholes in that part of India. When not analyzing the social behavior and ecology of dholes, Venkataraman studies Asian elephant populations and their habitats.



In her many articles on sea life, writer **Cheryl Lyn Dybas** ("Undertakers of the Deep") has combined her education in oceanography and marine policy with her love of boating and diving. A memorable moment during her week aboard the *Atlantis* came when the ship had to swerve to miss hitting a live whale, a rare event the crew found particularly eerie, given their mission of visiting cetacean graveyards. A resident of Falls Church, Virginia, Dybas has contributed to the *Washington Post, Smithsonian, Wildlife Conservation, Adirondack Life, Yankee,* and other publications. Painter **Michael Rothman** enjoys accompanying scientists in the field and has traveled as an illustrator to Puerto Rico, Samoa, French Guiana, and Brazilian Amazonia. For the whale article, Rothman and an American Museum of Natural History mammalogist reconstructed a gray whale from the actual bones. Rothman studied fine arts, painting, and botanical illustration in New York City. His work has appeared in various magazines, in the *New York Times,* and in books, including *Inside the Amazing Amazon* (text by Don Lessem, Crown, 1995) and *Nafanua: Saving the Samoan Rain Forest* (text by Paul Alan Cox, W. H. Freeman, 1999).

An archaeologist specializing in Caribbean prehistory, **Samuel M. Wilson** ("When We Were Very Young") also enjoys rediscovering the world through the eyes of his two children, Nellie and Marshall. A longtime contributor to *Natural History,* Wilson has been especially interested in chronicling multicultural interactions and their effects on the modern world. A collection of his essays on this subject is found in his recent book, *The Emperor's Giraffe and Other Stories of Cultures in Contact* (Westview, 1999). His longest field project has focused on the pre-Columbian archaeology of the island of Nevis in the West Indies. He is an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Texas, Austin.



A wildlife photographer for fifteen years and a professional in this field for the past four, **Mark Hamblin** ("The Natural Moment") has traveled to Africa, India, and various national parks in the United States. His specialties, however, are much closer to home: the birds and mammals of Great Britain. Hamblin acknowledges a particular interest in Scottish subjects and in photographing common birds displaying typical aspects of their behavior. For the photograph of the bathing mute swan featured this month, he used a Canon T90 camera and a Canon 500mm lens. He notes that he had time to take a number of shots while the bird splashed on the lake but that this one stood out because the flying droplets against the dark water highlight the bird's actions.