



THE UNCERTAIN FATE OF A PRINCELY DIVERSION

An historical survey of tops

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Sculptured on the walls of the palace of Ariris (formerly read Araras) at Carchemish, ca. 780 B.C., is the representation of the king's sons at play. Each prince grasps a whip in his right hand and holds a top in the left. A third top, perhaps 8 cm. high, upright and presumably spinning, is shown at their feet. The whips appear to be made of two lashes, perhaps 30 cm. long, set in a stock or handle of about the same length.

The scene must rank as one of the oldest for this manner of pastime. In its broadest sense, a top is an object with a principal axis about which it can rotate. Until modern times, the term "top" has usually connoted play, pastime, amusement, but play is not necessarily confined to children as may be seen in the representations of bearded males and skirted females.

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Attic red-figure lekythos, ca. third quarter of 5th century B.C. Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Photo courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art)

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Sculpture from Carchemish. (From Hogarth, *Carchemish*, Part 1, Introductory, Plate B7. By permission, Trustees of the British Museum).



Of at least six major forms of the top now recognized, there is evidence that four were known to Classical peoples. These forms were: the twirler or teetotum set in motion by the thumb and one or more of the fingers of the hand twisting the stem of the top; the yo-yo, unchanged in principle to the present day; the buzzer (equivalent to a button on a doubled string), and the whipping-top.

The first form is preeminent because it is so readily produced from materials at hand; its manipulation asks for deftness rather than strength. Of the four types, the buzzer is the only one which has failed to survive from Classical times. We know it only as art. Probably known to all peoples as a noise maker (buzzing or humming), it is possible that Greek artisans refined the construction and showed that intensity and pitch could be varied through a modest range by manipulation of the cords.

Whether trivial or not, the top and its play are part of a persistent pattern traceable for several millennia. Great gaps appear in its identifiable history (if the term history is warranted). The number of forms increases through time, due in part to the better chance of survival but also, in part, to new and perhaps accidental variants. The storage areas of the University Museum afford ample evidence of many primitive peoples having one or more forms of the top. So widespread is its



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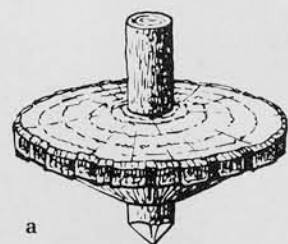


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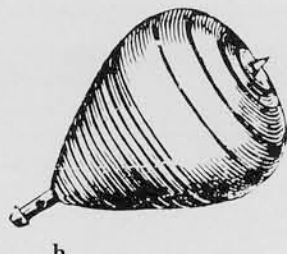
3 Hermes with youth on Attic red-figure lekythos, ca. second quarter of 5th century B.C. (From Watzinger, *Griechischer Vasen in Tübingen*)

4 Interior of Attic red-figure kylix, early 5th century B.C. (From Hartwig, *Meisterschalen*)

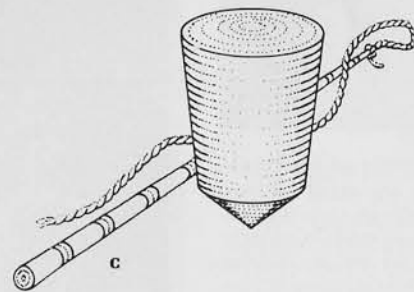
5a-f The six principal types of tops: a, the twirler; b, the cast peg top; c, the whip top; d, the supported-in-starting top; e, the yo-yo; f, the buzzer.



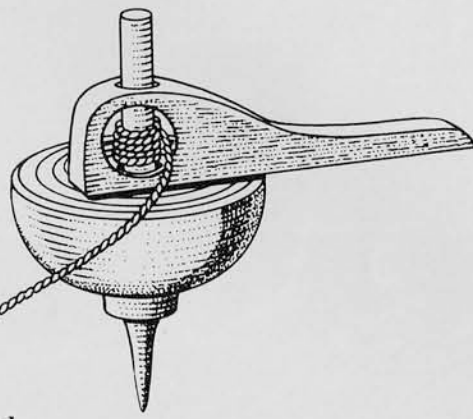
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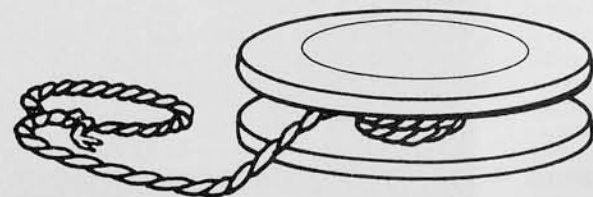
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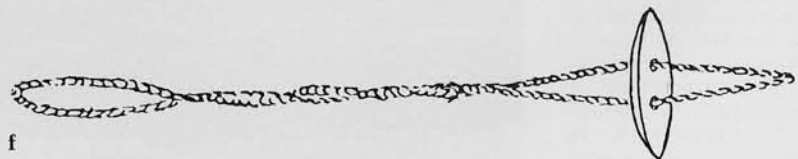
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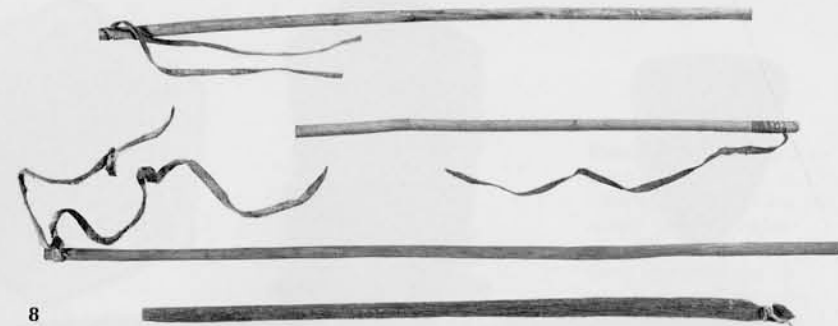


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6 Supported top. Gyroscope model; U.S.A.; 1867. Designed by Amos E. Dolbear; constructed by E. S. Ritchie. Said to be the first successful electric motor driven gyroscope ever built to demonstrate the earth's rotation. Courtesy Smithsonian Institution.

7 Twirler. Bontoc culture, Luzon, Philippines. Collected 1905-1910 by E. H. and S. S. Metcalf for The University Museum.

8 Whips for whip tops. North American Indian; pliant strips of hide on staffs. Classical and later art usually depict the lash and staff as of about equal length (approx. 30-40 cm.). Top to bottom: Algonkian, Arapahoe; Wind river, Wyoming. Yankton Dakota Sioux; Fort Peck, Montana. Shoshonean; Wind River, Wyoming. Yankton Dakota Sioux; Fort Peck, Montana. Collected by the John Wanamaker Expedition, 1900, for The University Museum.

9 Supported-in-starting top. The starting cord is wrapped around the shaft which is held in an upright position by the left hand as the cord is pulled by the right hand to start the rotation. Sitia chiefdom, Sherbro Island, Sierra Leone. Collected by a University Museum expedition, H. U. Hall, 1936-37.



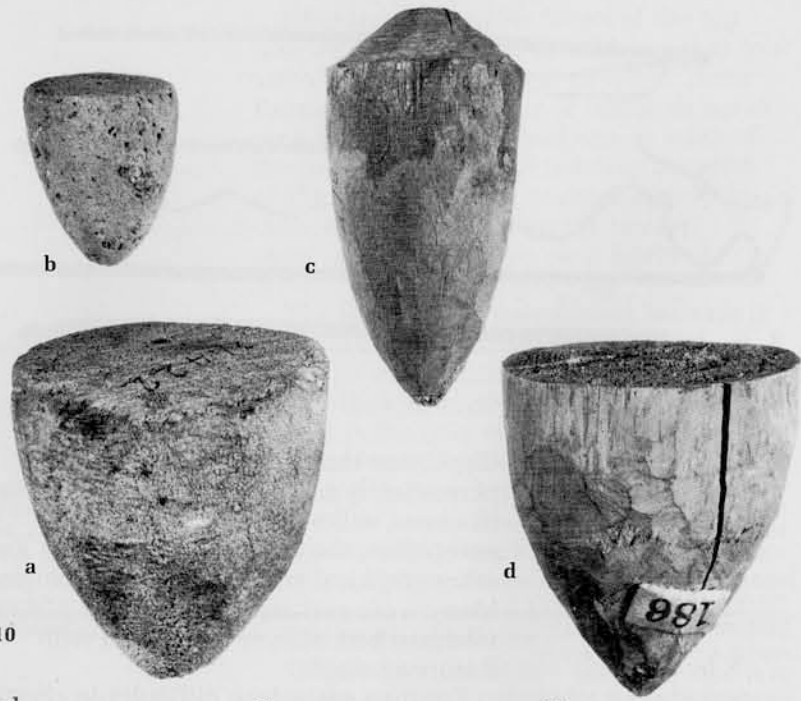
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dispersion that it is probable that no permanently inhabited portion of the earth has been without this toy. With few exceptions, the Museum's specimens are ethnographical rather than archaeological. Many were gathered from remote peoples who had had little or no contact with European ways.

Curators often face difficulty in classifying such objects in their collections when there is no record of their source. The University Museum plans to formalize information about this toy as known from such early examples as that at Carchemish to that of the 20th century Sherbro, and invites readers of *Expedition* to participate in this project by sending in data about the spinning top they may have encountered in other cultures both ancient and modern.



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10a-d Whip tops: a, Okinawa, Japan, coarse white coral; b, Korea, unglazed (terracotta?); c, Korea, wood; d, Okinawa, Japan, wood. Collected for The University Museum: a and d, by W. H. Furness, 1896; b and c, by E. N. Landis, 1895.

11 Whip tops, stone. Tiahuanaco, Bolivia. Pre-Columbian. University Museum Expedition, Max Uhle, 1895.



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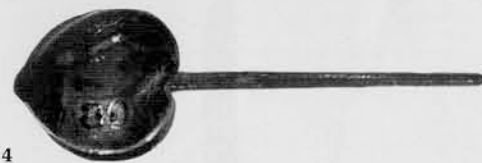
12 Cast peg top, wood (no metal used). Philippines, early 20th century. Collected by E. H. and S. S. Metcalf for The University Museum.

13 Whip top, basalt. Oahu, Hawaii. Courtesy Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Hawaii.

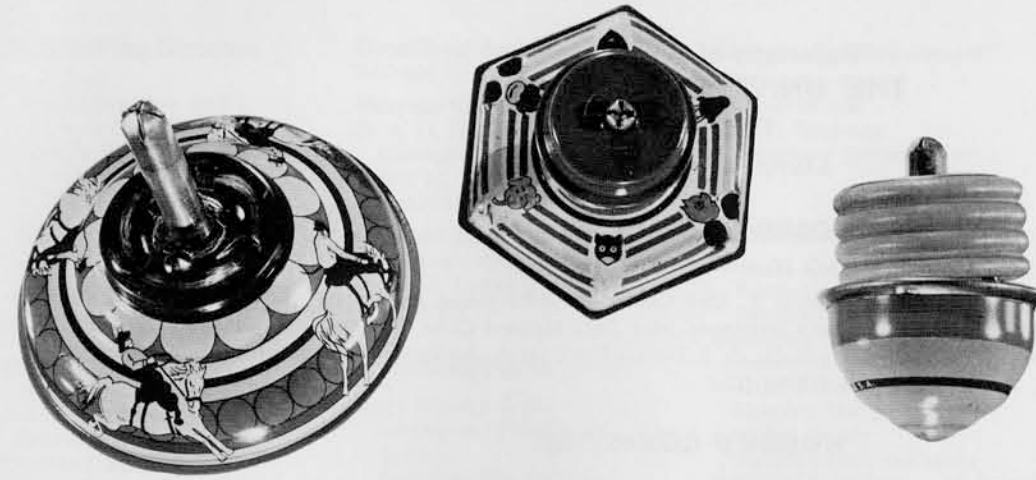


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14 Twirler. Fashioned from candlenut (*Aleurites moluccana*). Gift of (Queen) Liliuokalani, ca. 1889-1890. Courtesy Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Hawaii.



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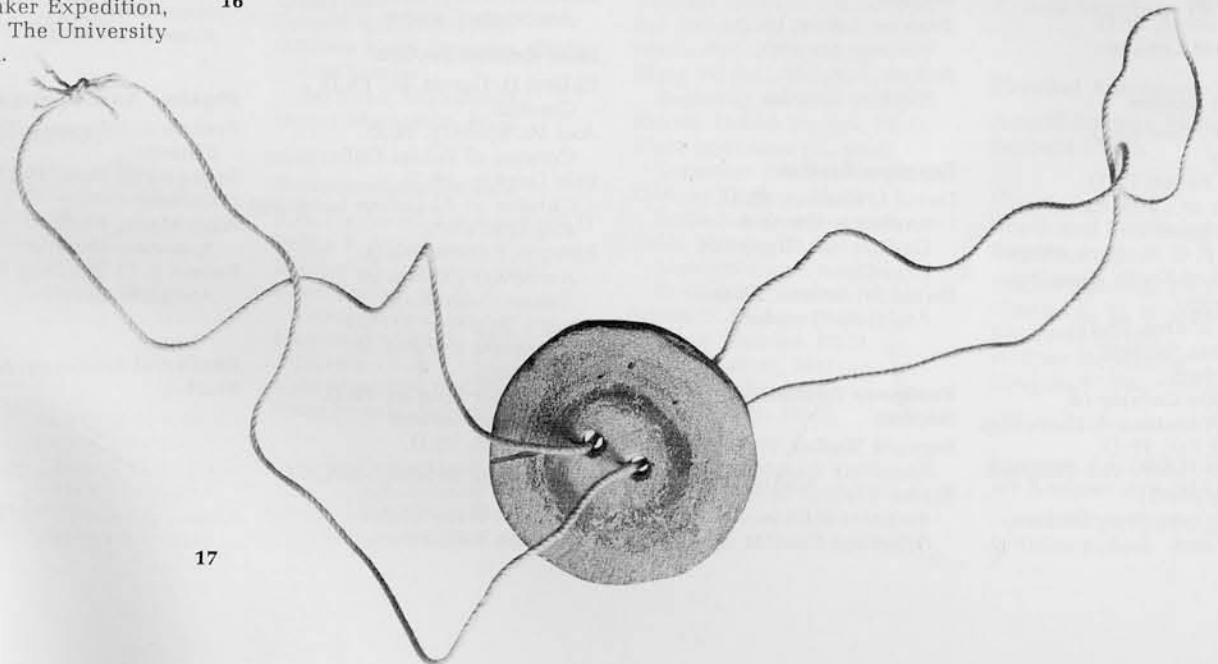
15 Twirlers: spring-tops. Light metal shells with winding devices. Shells are perforated to enhance audio effects. This form of top has some of the characteristics of the supported top. University Museum collection.



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16 Cast peg tops. Dense wood, well finished. Johore, Malay Peninsula, late 19th century. Collected by Stewart Culin for The University Museum.

17 Buzzer. Vicinity of Oraibi, Arizona. Hopi. Collected by the John Wanamaker Expedition, 1901, for The University Museum.



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Douglas W. Gould has been a volunteer in the University Museum for many years. Professionally he is an engineer specializing in research and development work in the field of fuels both natural and synthetic. As a hobby he has studied the spinning top as it has been known for more than three thousand years and all over the world. He has catalogued the large collections of tops of the Smithsonian Institution and the University Museum. In 1973, Mr. Gould published *The Top*, the first comprehensive work on the subject. A *Reference Guide to the Spinning Top*, a compilation of several hundred photos of tops and a description of their classification and characteristics is in preparation.