THE UNCERTAIN FATE
OF A PRINCELTY DIVERSION

An historical survey of tops

DOUGLAS W. GOULD

Sculptured on the walls of the palace of Ariris (formerly read Araras) at Carche-
mish, 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.
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 twister or testufrn 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 beater (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 beater 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 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 Carlsbad 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.
11a-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. D. Furness, 1890; b and c, by K. N. Leland, 1890.

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

13

14

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.

16

17
Buzzer. Vicinity of Orchi, Arizona, Hopi. Collected by the John Wesley Powell Expedition, 1902, for The University Museum.

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 cataloged 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 photographs of tops and a description of their classification and characteristics is in preparation.