SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

How round was *Pila*? – Part 2

By Pasko Varnica

**Follis**

It is impossible not to encounter the word follis when reading about the ball games in the ancient Rome. In addition to being a bouncy ball filled with air, to complicate things, follis had multiple meanings in Latin. Follis was also a leather bag and a small coin.

If you search for it on Wikipedia, you will reach a page dedicated to the coin. If from here you follow the thread via the link “For other uses, see *Follis (disambiguation)”,* (where disambiguation stands for elucidation or removal of ambiguity) and then the link “Follis (ball game), a Roman ball game”, you will reach a page titled Balloon (game).

The page contains a few lines that, in summary, say the game of balloon was known in ancient Rome as *follis*, that was similar to today’s volleyball and that was played with a forearm guard or bracer. According to the article, the forearm guard was used because balloons were heavy. There is a drawing showing three players, two of them handling a large ball each and a third player with a forearm guard on his extended arm.

The drawing is from *Nordisk familjebok,* a 19th century Swedish encyclopedia about the culture and history of Nordic countries. There is absolutely no evidence that this drawing is from Roman times.

Is the Wikipedia’s article about *follis* inaccurate then? The reference to the forearm guard may be wrong; I am not familiar with any original source from the antiquity referencing a game played in this manner. Fosbroke, see footnote[[1]](#footnote-1) mentions a balloon game played with a wooden arm bracer but he is careful in pointing out that it was played in medieval and not in classical times. The rest of the Wikipedia article is in all likelihood correct including the claim that the word *follis* stood for the activity of playing with it. As in modern times where for example the word football means both the game and the pigskin, in the vernacular of the Romans *follis* likely held the dual meaning.

*Follis* was light; it was probably played by being thrown up in the air, not too different from a friendly game of volleyball one can observe today in parks or sandy beaches. Clearly though the game Romans played did not have the sophisticated rules of the contemporary competitive beach or hard-court volleyball.

Some historians speculate that follis was filled with air while others suppose that it may have been filled with feathers, wool or seed husks. My guess is that all claims are accurate. A friendly mixed-gender exercise probably used a large light follis made of leather patches stitched over an air-filled bladder. On the other hand, when guys played it, I know, I play volleyball, that poor ball is hit hard, it is spiked and it is killed. I am not convinced that the Romans possessed the practical know-how to make an airtight ball that would survive for long when the male competitive spirit reigned over the match. In all likelihood, men used a smaller follis, also having an outer shell of stitched leather but stuffed with a light material such as bird feathers or wool as protection for the air-filled bladder, but we do not know for sure. Balsdon asserts that this smaller ball was called paganica. In my opinion paganica, used for expulsim ludere, see below, was even smaller and the feathers, wool or seed husks were packed tightly.

There was also a Follis Pugillaris or Pugillatorius that was small and a Folliculus, also very small, played with the hands.

**Trigon**

Trigon stands for triangle. On-line’s [www.TheFreeDictionary.com](http://www.TheFreeDictionary.com) defines the word *trigon* as a triangular lyre or harp of Roman antiquity. Wikipedia has a few lines dedicated to it.

Trigon was played on a triangular court, hence its name. The players stood at the corners of the triangle. If the player was rich, he would have his own scorer and own ball boy[[2]](#footnote-2), a help I wish I have when I play tennis. Balsdon thought trigon might be similar to cricket fielding drills. If you search YouTube using the term “cricket fielding practice”, you will find a few interesting videos.

The balls used for trigon were smaller than the one used for *harpastum* and likely less hard. This is understandable since the ball was thrown directly at a person, although even that is a guess. The rules and how the points were calculated are a mystery. Was a point assigned when a player dropped a ball? If so, how big was his area? Could a player avoid the ball thrown in his direction?

These questions assume an over-simplified game. I want to suggest that trigon was more complicated than throwing a single ball around and that the existences of multiple balls in play contributed to its complexity. It is conceivable that trigon was played with multiple balls, perhaps two per player. Imagine six balls simultaneously in the air. That would require skill, dexterity, quick reflexes and eye-to-hand coordination, characteristics that corroborate what the ancient sources say about trigon. My supposition is based on a woodcut from an original fresco found in the baths of Titus. The fresco probably represented trigon. LacusCurtius’s page for the description of *Pila* has a reproduction of the woodcut[[3]](#footnote-3).

Based on Martial’s lauding the grace and dexterity of a left-handed catch and a couple of other extant sources, there is a widespread supposition that the left hand was part of the rules of trigon. Wikipedia says that the ball had to be caught with the right hand and thrown with the left. I doubt the validity of this interpretation. Trigon would be no fun unless you are a lefty. Conceptually, left hand rule would be a sissy rule. It is not an occasional use of the left hand that is in doubt. With multiple balls in play, the participants were likely forced to use both hands at times. It is the enforcement of the rule. Think about it, do you know of any contemporary game where the contestants must use the other hand? That would be preposterous, anti-competitive and outright no fun.

One last item: when trigon is brought up the word *pilicrepus* creeps up. Balsdon says that pilicrepus stands for the person who kept the game score. Others have often cited his definition. J. B. Wordsworth, see footnote[[4]](#footnote-4), defines *pilicrepus* as a trigon player. The word derives from *pila* (ball) and the verb *crepo* (to make noise). I am of the opinion the *pilicrepus* is a generic term for a ball player and is mainly associated with expulsim ludere (see below) which was probably a racket making activity. Seneca used the word pilicrepus when he complained about the darn noise that kept him awake. I do not think that he grumbled only about the point scorers, although thinking about the grunts of our baseball umpires, maybe he did, but I am not convinced. Pilicrepus probably stood for a noisy ball player.

**Datatim, Raptim and Expulsim ludere**

Latin roots of these words go like this: datatim is an adverb of dato, tossing from one to another; raptim is speedily snatching; expulsim is an adverb of expello, eject, drive out forcefully. Ludere is a verb and stands for to play.

There are many original literary sources from the classics referencing these three ball games. I am not going to bore you with them. Suffice to say that playing pila, paganica or follis was a widely popular past time in ancient Rome. Sports are an outlet for men’s competitive spirit and playing ball is its simplest and most enduring form.

Children played wherever they found open space. Adults utilized an open area called sphaeristerium located next to a gym or connected to a bathhouse. Refer to Wikipedia for a picture of a typical sphaeristerium. Large villas had open areas for ball games. From the dawn of mankind, if you have a ball, friends and open space, you are going to kick or throw that ball and everyone is going to join you in fun. Rules are made up as you go along and with time are evolved and solidified based on group thinking, technology and the environment. That is probably how datatim, raptim and expulsim ludere were born.

Why were these all hand-based games? There is no evidence, not even anecdotal, that a game similar to the contemporary soccer was ever played in an organized fashion. As I said earlier, I am of the opinion that the Romans did not possess the knowledge to construct a ball hardy enough to withstand being struck by the players with their feet. Additionally, the skill to make sturdy but light shoes required to enjoy kicking the ball, was out of reach of the Romans.

Fosbroke, see footnote 1, wrote, “Raptim ludere was when they attempted to take the ball at the first bounce; datatim ludere, when they tossed the ball to another, and made feints to deceive the players; expulsim ludere, when they pushed one another aside to seize the ball”.

Undoubtedly, there is more to it. The above picture shows players, and probably an umpire, the person wearing a toga, playing a game that could be datatim ludere. Note the goal set up on one side. The goal reminds me of handball that I played as a youngster. You can find examples of handball on YouTube. Do not confuse it with handball played on a racquetball type court. That said, the game Romans played was probably a combination of the two contemporary handball games. Gloves were used (but likely in the most competitive situations only) and the ball was allowed to ricochet from the adjacent wall. As the picture of a sphaeristerium shows, there was a tall wall next to the playing field. The ball was probably thrown against the wall in an attempt to reach teammates. Note though that it could not have bounced far because rubber was unknown. Lack of elasticity prevented the ball from being dribbled, that is, bounced off the ground, a requirement of the contemporary handball. That explains the small size of the ball used by these games, as shown in the above picture.

It is suggested that only expulsim ludere employed a sidewall and that as such it is the precursor to today’s handball, the one played on a racquetball court. There is no evidence in any of the original sources that datatim and raptim ludere did not use the sidewall as well. The only difference between the three games documented by the original literary sources is the behaviors of the players, as summarized by old Fosbroke, see above.

It is doubtful that contemporary handball has its origins in the games Romans played as some claim. There are records of handball-like games played in Egypt and pre-Columbian America. Nobody should take credit for supposedly inventing a new game of ball; playing ball is in our DNA. We get up in the morning, we eat and we spend the rest of the day surviving between meals. At night, we all dream. During the day, most of us, ancient Romans included, play pila or follis or whatever you want to call it, ball is a ball and by any other name is still a ball.

1. Encyclopaedia of Antiqities, And Elements of Archaeology, Classical and Mediæval by the Rev. Thomas Duddley Fosbroke, 1825, freely available on Google:

   <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=Gcv4WxCSK0gC&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&authuser=0&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA483> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Petronius, Satyricon, Trimalchio played trigon [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA\*/Pila.html#Harpastum](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Pila.html#Harpastum) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. J. B. Wordsworth, Fragments and Specimens of Early Latin, 1874, freely available on Google play at <https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=pFwtAQAAMAAJ> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)