SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

How round was *Pila*? – Part 1

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Author’s Note: Sport vs. Game

This essay is about ball games played by the ancient Romans. Our web site is dedicated to sport in antiquity. There is a difference between sport and game and I believe that the distinction must be clarified. Term *sport* reflects a general activity, while term *game* identifies a specific instance of that activity. For example, soccer is a sport; when two soccer teams meet, they play a game.

There is more: *game* is not necessarily a subset of *sport*. For example, poker is a game, but not a sport because it does not require a physical activity. Hence, sport is defined as “an organized competitive physical activity regulated by rules”. Organization and competition characteristics of various sports may attract spectators who might watch games for their own fun and enjoyment. The reason for watching a game could be multiple, including passion and interest in a particular sport.

Ball games discussed by this essay were not affiliated in an organization. Consequently, they cannot be placed under the heading of sport. They were played by the Romans for fun or perhaps a prize or for the mere need to exercise.

I have combed several existing original sources to provide a comprehensive picture of ancient ball games. Thanks to my hands-on knowledge of what motivates people to play in competitive activities that demand physical exertion, interpretation of historical material was done with an eye on practicality. That is, I distilled the many references to lay down the essential characteristics that are of interest to a sportsman: the rules and objectives, the scoring and, most importantly, the method for selecting the winner. However, given the paucity of original material, in some instances we may never move beyond conjecture.

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*Pila* is ball in Latin. Bill Thayer, in a footnote to the article about the *pila* where, incidentally, the game of *harpastum* is described, writes: “As moderns, we take it for granted that balls bounce: they're perfectly spherical, can be made perfectly smooth and their insides are well pressurized, either by air or by tightly compressed elastic substances. None of this would have been true in Antiquity.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Very true! For a reference to Mr. Thayer’s expertise in the field of ancient Roman world, check out his web site quoted in the footnote below. How well round, how smooth, bouncy or heavy a ball did not deter the Romans from playing ball. Adults played in the public baths and in the *palaestrae[[2]](#footnote-2)* and children played outdoors as baseball and soccer are played in the streets and neighborhood parks in modern times. Playing or watching ball games is fun. As I said and will say again, Romans knew how to have fun.

Oh sure, the Greeks had their Olympic games. Every four years we are fascinated by the modern Olympics, but let’s be honest here. On weekends and weekdays, do we sit on the couch to watch, say, discus throwers? No, we are in the habit of watching balls being kicked, batted or thrown around. We play ball and are fans of the many sports that use and abuse balls of different sizes and shapes.

The superiority of ball-based activities in sports, entertainment, exercise and personal enjoyment in general is undeniable. Romans used three kinds of balls: *pila, follis* and *paganica*. *Pila* was small and hard, likely used for *harpastum*, see below. Follis was allegedly filled with air; see part 2 of this essay. Paganica was filled with feathers or wool, was lighter than the *pila*, probably bounced well and was likely used for a game we know as *expulsim ludere*, explained in part 2.

**Harpastum**

Harpastum is the best understood and documented of the ball games played in Rome, which does not say much about the other games. The Latin dictionary by Babylon.com translates *harpasta* as rugby.

The word derives probably from “*harpago*” an iron-grabbing tool with fingers.[[3]](#footnote-3) Word etymology not being an exact science, another possible origin is the Greek verb *harpazein* — ἁρπάζειν — "to grab".

*Harpastum* was a team sport. A team sport is defined as a competition where two or more people work together toward a common goal. Any number of people, but probably not more than 12 per side played it. The field had boundary sidelines and was divided in half. Children would probably draw a line in the dirt and play. *Pila* used for *harpastum* was hard and a bit smaller than the modern soccer ball.

To start the game, each team would position its players on one-half of the field. The object of the game was to tackle the opponent who held the ball; hence, the associations with rugby, then snatch the ball away to bring it to their own side where it was dropped for points. The etymology of the name probably derives from either the intent of snatching or taking the ball away from the opponent or from the action of tackling the opposing player.

I imagine that the opponents would immediately surround the player holding the ball. At that point, the ball holder, unable to move forward, would try to pass the ball to one of his open teammates. The teammate, once he had the possession of the ball, would attempt to run towards his own side of the field while doing his best not to get tackled along the way. I can imagine the excitement when the ball was intercepted while in the air. All this is well known to anyone who is familiar with contemporary rugby or football.

The objective of the game by the team that had the ball was to keep the ball on its own side, while the objective of the other team was to snatch the ball away and bring it to the other side of the field to score points. The strategy must have consisted of dedicating sufficient physical power to tackle the player holding the ball while at the same time covering opposing players to prevent the ball from being passed. Hence, *harpastum* required strength and speed. It was an exhausting and vigorous exercise.

All this is a presupposition; there is no surviving evidence that describes of the rules of the game. I am puzzled by how the game was started. Some theories suggest that the game started with a coin toss. I am not convinced of it because the coin toss is the product of our contemporary mind and not of the thinking of the Romans.

Next question, what happened when the team holding the ball went out of bounds? And, an essential aspect for all sports aficionados, how did the game end? Here again, it is suggested that the team that reached 21 points had won. There is no evidence for that.

Wikipedia has an entry for *harpastum* with a good list of ancient sources that mention it. Wikipedia goes on saying that *harpastum* seems like an inverted form of rugby. Calling it inverted rugby paints a confusing picture. Rather, think of our rugby or football fields. They have three areas, two end zones and a middle where the game is played. Now imagine the field divided into two end zones only. One team starts in one end zone and scores a point when it reaches the other end zone. This is why one team calls that other end zone theirs. The other team starts when a point is scored and so on. In my opinion, this explanation is simpler to understand than the inverted rugby concept.

The online Encyclopaedia Britannica defines *harpastum* as a small ball filled with feathers. No mention of the game, ouch. Another case of why you cannot rely on academia to learn about sports in antiquity.

The picture shown on this page is an ancient Roman fresco. The picture is in the public domain in the United States. You will find it via a Google search freely available on the internet under “Images of Harpastum History”. This fresco cannot possibly be of people playing *harpastum*. I imagine that *harpastum* was not played wearing tunics or being fully dressed as the person shown on the right. *Harpastum* players, both male and female, wore very little, if anything at all. Do not get too excited at the thought. There is no evidence of mixed gender *harpastum*. Moreover, *harpastum* was much more violent than the gentle images shown on this fresco. The picture is likely depicting *datatim* *ludere*. *Datatim* *ludere* ball game is described in part 2 of this essay.

1. The key source material for this essay are: **A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities,** by William Smith, D.C.L., LL.D., originally published by John Murray, London, 1875 and today freely available on the website LacusCurtius, Into the Roman World, <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/home.html>, where the book was kindly placed and indexed by Bill Thayer, for which we, the Romanophiles thank him profusely; **Everyday life of the Greeks and Romans** by E. Guhl and W. Koner, first published mid-19th century, translated into English and published by D. Appleton and Company, NY in 1896. It is currently available from Crescent Books, NY.; **Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome** by J.P.V.D. Balsdon, first published by The Bodley Head, Great Britain, 1969. The original supporting material from the antiquities is quoted above and is not repeated in this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Exercise rooms, gyms [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. LacusCurtius offers a picture and further description of *harpago* at [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA\*/Harpago.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA%2A/Harpago.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)