

# CAPUT AUT NAVIS

## Heads or tails

### The world of children

The world of play is often associated with childhood, but not all games are child's play.

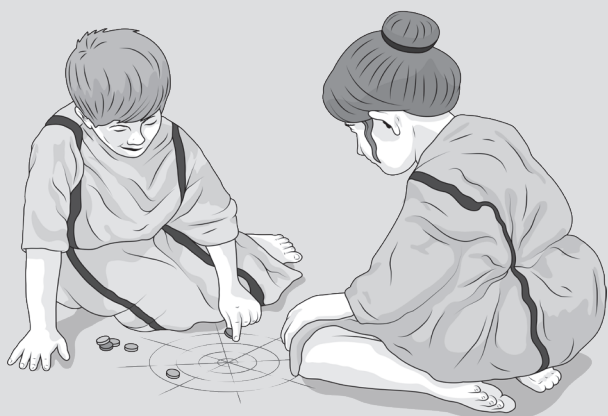
As children, through play, we learn to develop our social skills, to assume new roles, or we simply have a good time. Through playing, we grow.

As adults we have tried our luck, left things to fate, and often called heads or tails.

For many of these games, traces of their existence have been left behind: discarded Iberian game pieces, small Roman board game counters that had been lost, long-forgotten broken toys...

This exhibition of archaeological objects from the collection of Granollers Museum aims to familiarise visitors with the way in which we have all played, as both children and adults, throughout history. Based on pieces conserved in the museum, visitors can embark on a playful themed journey through the world of games.

Starting with children, we will discover how youngsters amused and educated themselves by playing over 2,000 years ago. Fancy a game?



### Playing kitchen

Toy pots and pans, small replicas of everyday utensils, allow us to play and fantasise, while mimicking adult activities and transporting us to their world. The line between a small object and a toy replica is often blurred, and size is not the only thing that comes into play in classifying them.

Plates, bowls, pots and cups were part of the toys used by girls in the time of the Iberians, who played kitchen long before the invention of crying dolls or remote-controlled cars. In the hands of children, a simple stick can become the finest toy.

These small objects serve to amuse us and to help us learn about life, while we play at being adults.

### Sounds and marbles

Bells have always been a versatile object: we know that they were used in religious ceremonies and as amulets, among other uses, but their musical potential also made them suitable for children. Bells and round bells were used as rattles for distracting babies. They were also sewn into toys so they would jingle and amuse youngsters.

In terms of games of skill, one of the most typical has always been marbles. Since time immemorial, marbles have been one of the most universal target practice games for generation after generation. Whether made from clay, ceramic, stone or glass, these small spheres have been, are, and always will be one of the best documented pastimes. Granollers Museum houses examples of them dating from Roman times right through to the modern age.

### *Alea iacta est* The die is cast

Since antiquity, games have been manifold and varied, yet many have left no trace of their existence: hide and seek, steal the bacon, tag, and more.

Only those employing mediums other than the imagination have left us with clues as to how the game was played. Proof of this are the game pieces recovered in Granollers and the surrounding area dating from Iberian and Roman times, which have made their way into the museum. Many of these pieces were for board games and made from various materials, such as ceramic, stone, glass or bone.

From noughts and crosses to target practice or strategy games, these pieces demonstrate how games have been adored by one and all since ancient times.

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## Glutton!

The name *tesserae lusoriae* (which means 'game pieces' in Latin) allows us to identify small bone plates, cut into rectangles, which have a decorated and perforated circular appendage. The main feature of the pieces is that they have a series of inscriptions on both sides. On one face there is either a positive or negative expression, while on the opposite side there is a numeral. We can see that there is a clear correspondence between derogatory expressions and low numerals, which increase as the words become more benevolent.

Some of the documented equivalences, excluding the most crude, are:

MOICE	adulterous	III
EBRIOSE	drunk	III
VAPIO	ill-mannered	III
PERNIX	agile	XVII
BENIGNVS	agreeable	XX
AMATOR	loving	XXX

This is an extraordinary piece, as only nine examples have been found in Catalonia, seven of them in the highly important city of Empúries.

The piece housed within Granollers Museum, recovered in the excavations of Puig del Castell de Samalús, has the term GVLO ('glutton') inscribed on it, which is associated with number IIII and, therefore, of negative characteristics.

We don't know how this game, which comprised about 20 pieces, was played exactly, but surely, with so many pieces, it must have been a game replete with shouting and laughter.

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## Let's play!

*Taba* is one of the games that is best documented in Iberian and Roman archaeological sites. *Taba*—whose name comes from the Spanish word for the foot bone, in this case of sheep, the astragalus—is a game that was played in different ways, although the most common and simplest form of the game was to use the bone as if it were a die, throwing it to the ground. Different values would be indicated depending on how it landed; that is, which of the four sides landed face up. The bones would also be used to make bets in games of skill and for divination.

Often these *tabas* were modified and filed down so that the probability of any one of the faces landing face up was equal, since the shape of the bone made it more likely for it to land on a certain side.

In spite of their shared origin, a distinction is made between *tabas* (as game pieces) and astragali (skeletal remains from lamb consumption), since the game pieces often appear together in high numbers or because the former have a smooth surface.

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## Caput aut navis

Since coins have existed, people have always tried to play their luck, tossing them to see which side is showing when the coin lands. Games of chance have been an inexhaustible source of betting and conflicts, from the most innocent to the most risky wagers.

However, although the mechanics of the game are simple and have not varied over time, its name has changed depending on the coin's features. Thus, in Roman times, the name that flourished was *caput aut navis* ('head or ship'), alluding to the features seen on some of their coins. The name derives from the iconography seen on Roman aces, which depicted the double face of the god Janus on the obverse and the bow of a warship on the reverse.

It wasn't until much later when it took on the name of heads and tails, making reference to the images portrayed on coins since medieval times. Today, the name of the game has stuck, even though a head and a cross haven't appeared together on Spanish coins for centuries.