

Toys as Agents for the Social Art of Play

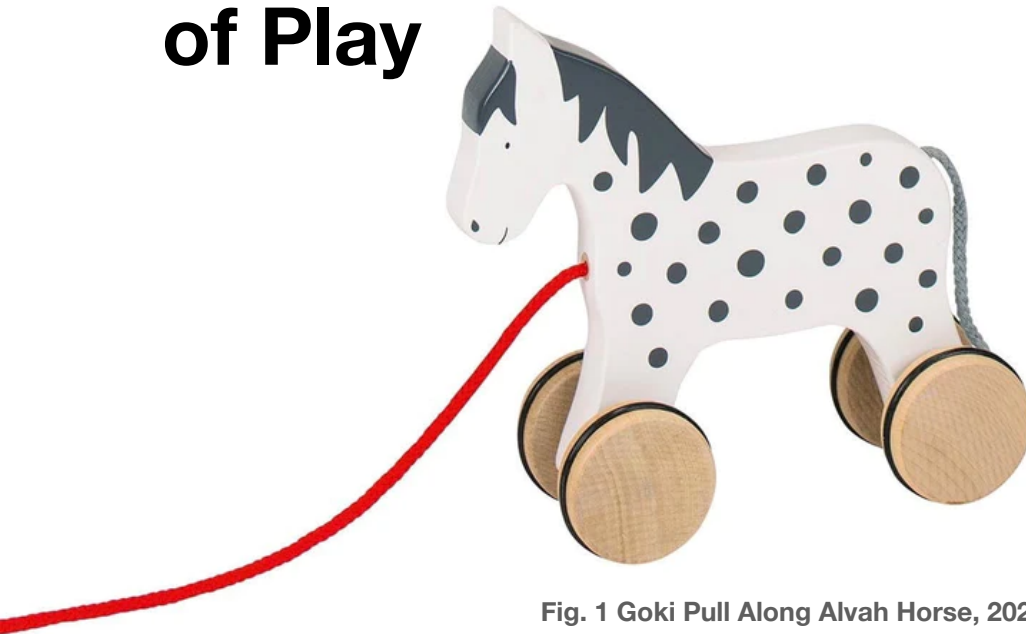


Fig. 1 Goki Pull Along Alvah Horse, 2023

Introduction:

The anthropology of art, especially when considering the 'visual art object', is often approached heavily influenced by aestheticism. But material objects, including art objects, can have the agency to substitute for people

within social practices (Gell, 1998), such as subadult learning and play (Sterelny, 2021). Therefore to reduce an object to its aesthetic values is to ignore "*the innumerable shades of social/emotional responses to artefacts*" (Gell, 1998, pg. 6). What then of object of which the aesthetic properties are secondary? Whereas Firth (1994) might argue toys are objects of craft, a separate form to art, so one might label a musical instrument. Therefore it is not these objects themselves, rather the influence they have on their social contexts that denotes art, as Nguyen proposes, where "music lets us record sounds, stories let us record narratives... games let us record agencies" (Nguyen, 2020, pg. 2). Thus toys are the instruments of the art of play and are therefore both highly social objects and also ones of strong agency, exemplifying how the anthropology of art is the study of the people behind the art rather than the objects themselves (Gell, 1998).

Agency of Art: a Summary

When considering the anthropology of art, Alfred Gell makes the strong argument that visual art objects would be better understood by adapting anthropological methods to the objects, rather than using the more 'art world' orientated approach of 'aesthetics' (Gell, 1998). He argues that to take the 'aesthetic' approach is to reduce the object's identity and agency to that assigned to it by the audience and therefore the cultural connotation associated with the tinted lens of the viewer (Gell, 1998). That is not to say that an object can be studied without the viewers own cultural framework colouring their perception, but rather by distancing the art of external or historic cultures from the 'lofty' Western ideals of art, one can gain a more thorough appreciation for the object's agency (Gell, 1998). Such an approach does not seek to understand the meaning of the art, but rather its

impact within its own social environment, it looks at the practical mediatory role of art objects in social processes rather than interpreting the 'subject' of the objects (Gell, 1998). Considering anthropology is a social science and is therefore more concerned with ascertaining social insights of the humans behind the objects rather than the objects themselves, objects that are produced and circulated in the physical, social world, it is small wonder that Gell places emphasis on '*agency, intention, causation, result and transformation*' (Gell, 1998, pg.6); in particular how objects can substitute 'social agents' - people. Gell's entire approach to the anthropology of art, of finding a theory and adapting it so as to become 'unoriginal in a new way' (pg.4) embodies the act of child's play itself; the reinterpretation of given materials and (academic) environment and the reapplication of known devices and materials exemplifies 'agency' and is in itself a replication of similar processes within child's-play (Milks et al, 2021). It is with some difficulty that a theory for art may be applied to toys, not only are they not visual objects (instead they are highly tactile), their production is more related to craft as they were most likely produced as functional, material-scaffolding for learning or as prototypes (Sterelny, 2021) rather than as a result of creative expression. However I propose it is not the construction of these toys but rather how they were used and the intricate social elements that are worked out around and through these toys as well as the toys themselves being used as instruments of creative expression that makes these art objects. Both the social and creative agency of toys meant they were central to a form of social art in which the highly creative, cognitive human brain used them to shape both social and cognitive environments.

The Art of Play; the Art of Agency

And thus we reach the central point of the debate, is the agency and art in the toy or the act of playing? To better suit Gell's (1998) approach and methodology, the object would be more pertinent, especially when considering we do not know how these toys were used beyond speculation and imposing our own understanding of contemporary counterparts. However recent studies into the necessity of play in child development and ethnographic comparisons in Hunter-Gatherer (HG) communities (such as Milks et al, 2021), as well as modern studies of the agency of games in today's society, a new approach can be considered. According to Nguyen (2020), games (and by extension, play) are the art form of agency; as music records sound, games records agency in a way that can be transmitted. They establish designated abilities, limitations and goals on a player that allows them to temporarily submerge themselves into an alternative agency, or rather a different and directed way of inhabiting their own agency (Nguyen, 2020). Games inscribe agencies to artificial vessels and can become a way of communicating forms of agency between individuals, Gell (1998) may be tempted to assign this into language as opposed to art, especially when considering that games can act as simulations to communicate scenarios, such as social or political practices, or of how these things *should* be (Nguyen, 2020). However the definition of art is irregular, as Lopes (2014) paraphrases it, an artistic medium is not merely a certain set of material but a set of technical resources, such as the brushstrokes in a painting; the medium of the game

designer *is* agency (Nguyen, 2020). They are social agents through which individuals can collaborate in the project of developing their own agency and autonomy, they teach skills and develop the ability to be flexible with personal agency that can then be used outside of the game (Nguyen, 2020). “The development of our agency and autonomy is not a solitary project” (Nguyen, 2020, pg. 19) and whilst this is demonstrated through modern day games, so is it true of play and child development through the material-scaffolding of toys throughout human history.

The Social Life of Toys and Play

Multiple studies of HG societies as well as the archaeological record of Anatomically Modern Humans (AMH) shows a long standing practice of children learning through the emulation of adult activities, individual play and peer activities in separate space (Milks et al. 2021). After all, play is a universal behaviour, exhibited in all animals, human and non-human, mostly among subadults; it is how skillsets are learned and practiced, as well as social boundaries explored (Kamp, 2001) as well as their own agency (Nguyen, 2020). Although the play structure and practices of contemporary HG societies is not a direct, ethnographic comparison, it can guide our understanding of how communities accommodated play and incorporated children, including the kinds of materials used that may not have been preserved in the archaeological record (Milks, et al. 2021). Furthermore the methodology for learning suggests an overarching practice of horizontal learning from play with peers, whilst vertical learning from parental figures and adults who shaped a child’s life through individual play and material-scaffolding with toys (Wilkie 2000). Toys were the material prompts with which parents could shape a child’s social environment and encourage small-scale, individual play, suggesting directional influence from parent to child, however children could express their own agency through what they did with these toys and also through requesting or showing preference for certain toys or materials (Wilkie 2000). Furthermore toys, materials and environments could be reinterpreted by children and imaginatively reapplied in creative ways in so far as it has been suggested that to be a toy was a part of many objects biographies, often prior to deposition (Milks et al. 2021). Because toys were such social objects, they were coveted, sometimes handed down for generations or deposited in the tombs of children (Sterelny, 2021).

The Agency of Toys in Invention

The creative act of play and reinterpretation of materials suggests the likelihood of child innovators, Sterelny (2021) suggests that within communities, children generate informations and techniques that are new to them through play and learning, such innovation does not necessarily translate to wider society, after all at some point all the ways of skinning the metaphorical cat have been explored. However studies (Riede et al. 2021) have shown that “the extent to which communities invest in children’s play

correlates with the dynamism and richness of their material culture” (Sterelny, 2021, pg.5). The first case study of the Bull Toy (fig. 2) from the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture and the invention of the wheel suggests a causation link between toys, play and innovation. Early dates for full fledged wheel place it around 3500 CE, this has since been predated with the discovery of wheeled toys from the economically and technically dynamic Cucuteni-Tripolye site in Ukraine which would have highly benefited from wheel technology as transport of goods was mostly undertaken by ox-drawn sledges on runners (Sterelny, 2021). Evidence of such innovation may have been preceded by toys of such oxen with axles and wheels. Sterelny (2021) supposes that if causal connections between the material-scaffolding of children’s development and a more dynamic adult material culture existed, it could suggest that such cultures took pride in artisan skills and therefore invested in a child’s education in craft-skill. Furthermore toys could be considered the leading edge of technology as toy-making was an inexpensive form of experimentation due to the small size and rigorous testing for durability through play. Moreover, through material scaffolding, learning was supported and therefore made successful, children were motivated and would have come out of adolescence confident and skilled into a rewarding environmental context that fuelled higher rates of successful innovation (Sterelny, 2021). Despite the coexistence of an animal-drawn (but non-wheeled) vehicle and small, wheeled items that preceded the development of a full-scale wheeled vehicle, the two would need to be combined creatively, a process in which children and or adolescents could have played a key role (Sterelny, 2021). This is due to the necessity of having an openly creative approach to associate these two ideas, as well as the time, freedom and curiosity to trial and error this exploration, requirements which would have been better met by youngsters,. However, they would have struggled to create full-scaled prototypes and may have lacked the motivation, skill and control of the necessary resources to facilitate this (Sterelny, 2021). Alternatively, an adult engaged in play with children and toy manufacture may have been exposed to the concept of combining the two which they then developed. Thus to what extent children may have played in the invention of wheeled vehicles is uncertain, but the possibility of a positive connection between enhanced material scaffolds for subadult learning and the rate of innovation in a community suggests toys weren’t just aids for learning and influencing the child, but for a child to enact their own creative agency on the material world as well as



Fig. 2: Cucuteni-Trypilian cow-on-wheels, 3950-3650 B.C, (MAP, 2008)

technology.

Case Study 1: The Bull from Cucuteni-Tripolye

The oldest example of the wheeled-animal-toy is the Bull from Cucuteni-Tripillian culture (fig. 2) and is dated to 3950-3650 BCE. What little is known about Cucuteni-Tripillian culture shows that whilst they had these wheeled animal toys, at the time they transported goods and materials on sleds, perhaps these were pulled by oxen, such as the one represented here. Although almost all mention of this toy is in passing reference to the bigger debate of 'who invented the wheel' (see MAB 2008), it appears to be carved of wood and painted with stripes down its back, it has no clear attachment for a pull string so perhaps it was more meant to be rolled around by hand in closer proximity to the player.

Case Study 2: Susa Toys

Slightly later on and markedly after the invention of the wheel, comes the hedgehog and lion wheeled carts from Susa (in Iran), dating to 1500-1200 CE and found in the Temple of Inshushinak Cache (Duthie, 2021). Other wheeled, terracotta animals are known to have existed in Susa, suggesting it was a popular design, however these ones are carved from two different stones, bitumen for the cart beds and limestone for the figurines which were inlaid with another stone at the eyes suggesting they were owned by someone wealthy (Duthie, 2021),

with access to skilled crafts-people. The animals were secured to the carts by holes in the cart beds that corresponded to pegs in the bottom of the animals, this no doubt made the



**Fig. 3: Lion Cart from Susa (1500-1100 BCE),
Louvre**



**Fig. 4: Hedgehog Cart from Susa (1500-1100
BCE), Louvre**

toy more engaging for it allowed for the removal of the animals. Perhaps this would extend the narrative of the child's play where smaller figures were then carried around by the child, which would explain why the two smaller hedgehog figurines are missing from the Hedgehog's cart, as demonstrated by the clusters of holes behind the main figurine. They could also have been a tool to practice fine-motor-skills on, much like the modern day shape-

sorter toys. On this cart there is a hole at the front through which a string could be tied so as to pull it along by, whereas the lion's cart has no such hole, however if you look at its back, you can see the smooth, straight stretch that invites a hand to be placed there in order propel the toy. Overall, these toys are enchanting, the fine detail of the hedgehogs toes and the general size of the figurines (the hedgehog is 5.5cm high and 6.8cm long) suggests that they were at least toys at some point before their deposition, whether votive or not (Duthie, 2021).

Case Study 3: Wheeled Animals From Mesoamerica

Wheeled animal toys are also found in Mesoamerica as early as 300-900 CE, where wheeled dogs, deer and large cats were carved from obsidian or formed of clay (Mursell, No Date). Like those of Susa, these are not beasts of burden, instead these are wild animals or predators. Perhaps models held spiritual meaning, the 'alter ego' (Mursell, ND), or perhaps these representations were used to demonstrate the movement and behaviours a child would need to learn, such as for hunting deer. The connotations of wheels, animals and transport are not relevant here, in an environment where human porters were more efficient (Mursell, ND). Rather I propose the main idea that would have been communicated through these toys is movement, something Mursell associated with vitality.



Fig. 5: Wheeled dog figurine made of obsidian (Mursell, ND)

Case Study 4: the Wheeled Horse of Lefkandi



Fig. 6: The clay horse of Lefkandi, 10-9thc CE. (Mammas, & Spandidos, 2012)

Toys were chosen by adults and given to children, which can suggest an imposed agenda for stressing importance of certain practices (Wilkie, 2000). For example this wheeled horse from Lefkandi bears jars on its back, suggesting an intentional association with transport and perhaps trade (Mammas, & Spandidos, 2012), thus framing the nature of the child's play and perhaps imposing a narrative that the gift giver wants to encourage. It dates to between the 10 to 9th century BCE, and was found in the grave of a boy on the western coast of the island

Euboea (Greece) although it was most likely crafted in Attica, across the South Evian Sea (Mammas, & Spandidos, 2012). Thus this was a gift chosen for the boy and transported by someone, potentially with trade connections themselves suggesting a personal investment in shaping the child's future through a gift that enhanced creativity, coordination and an understanding of the mechanics of wheeled vehicles.



Fig. 7: A 5,000-year-old toy chariot (Fidan in Laskow, 2017)



Fig. 8: Chariot Assemblage (Tacopino, 2018)

Case study 5: Wheeled Chariots from Sogmatar

Labelled as the “world’s oldest ‘Matchbox’ car,” from Sogmatar, Turkey (Tacopino, 2018), this clay chariot was found in a young child’s grave along with other toys such as a rattle, miniature figurines of birds and an even smaller version of this chariot (fig. 8). It was likely intended to be drawn by a team of four equids, attached to the chariot through the whole in the front panel (fig. 7)¹. Further inspection shows what appears to be traces of pigments all over the toy, meaning it would have even visually engaging as well as physically. Furthermore the accompaniment of miniature birds could have been to enhance the narrative of play enacted around this toy, such as a hunting scene or a trip to market. Regardless of what ideas this toy was intended to communicate between parents and child, “it shows us the sense of art and children’s sense of play 5,000 years ago” (Uludagğ in Tacopino, 2018)

The Wider Picture: What Can These Toys Tell Us of Ancient Communities?

These toys are not just insight into play and material practices of the past, but also insight into social environments of the children in them. Although these toys might be recognisable to a western audience and suggest a basic understanding of how it may have been handled, the social connotations as to what this play *meant* and therefore

¹ This is from a comparison with images on the Royal Standard of Ur and my own speculation.

interpretations should be limited. For example, these toys would probably have been used for promoting independent play, what does this tell us of the social lives around the people promoting these toys and play style? The connotations of promoting independent play vary and are reliant on the cultural context, however it has been suggested that such play is important to a child for the development of fine motor skills (Milks et al. 2021). Alternatively it could reveal the care structure in place, childcare of infants is full time, but adults will still have other tasks to complete and therefore the child will need to be occupied, therefore these toys may have been stand-ins for a playmate, thus demonstrating their social agency. The presence of rich material culture for children could also be a sign of social distancing from playmates the caregivers deem unsuitable, perhaps due to economic or social differences (Kamp, 2001). On the other hand, a lack of playmate could be a sign of population reduction and therefore the substitution of a cohort of peers. Moreover it could show a social shift towards independent play and play with designated materials, thus play becomes *for* the children and may no longer focus around emulations of adult activities, potentially reflecting a cultural shift towards plays and games becoming an art of agency (as discussed by Nguyen, 2020).

Limitations of the Art of Agency and the Application to Toys

Gell's period specific aesthetics, an expansion on Baxendall's (1972) idea that the reception of historical art is affected by how 'art' is viewed at the time, focuses on aligning oneself (as the 'viewer') with the 'way of seeing' of the creator in order to appreciate it. This can be disputed, is not an object's agency just as prevalent in its effect on a modern audience as it was in its contemporary time? Although an anthropological approach, as according to Gell, would try to recapture and try to understand the object's social context, the highly socially-central objects that are toys have such obvious agency as to be immediately recognisable millennia later. It is this embedded agency that facilitates the viewing of this object with a shared 'way of seeing' of wanting to physically engage with the object, such objects guide our perception towards the art of play and into considering how such an act may be carried, becoming fluid in our agency (Nguyen, 2020). This may even evolve into thinking of potential narratives that may have been attached to such objects. Consider the toy chariot from Turkey, would the child have imagined riding in it themselves or hero or king from legend? Who or what would have pulled it? Was it rode into battle or in a grand race? How about the wheeled oxen from Cucuteni-Tripolye, was it one they would have seen in their daily life? Did it have a name? Would it have been one that bore a sled, or fattened for feasting? Consider the Athenian horse bearing amphorae on its back, was it going to market or coming in from the fields? What was in the jars? Although we will never know the stories children attached to such objects, and indeed the application of narratives may be an entirely modern, western supposition of how objects were played with, such items would have still been prompts for engaging with the wider world. The parents would have communicated value through what was represented, for example the horse used for bearing goods. If one were to look

in Central America, one would see that the wheeled animals were not beasts of burdens at all, but mostly predators of the rainforest or wild game such as deer. These highly social objects are similar their shared central theme of *movement*, whether through depicting the animals themselves on wheels or the chariot which would have been pulled by animals, the use of wheels aided this movement. The second theme being that these were for children, and it could be suggested that their presence marks the intentional provision of material for children to play with independently or in smaller groups. This is an object perhaps through which parents may communicate values (eg. the movement of cattle, the importance of commerce) but also would have promoted play, these objects were not direct results of children emulating adult tasks as can be seen in the flint snapping of early AMHs. Whether to avoid unsuitable play mates, to occupy the child in place of a playmate or to help develop finer motor skills, these were objects devoted entirely to the act of play. Regardless of the cultural context, these objects are timeless in their agency as the playmates of children.

Conclusion

Price (1989) proposes that when viewing art, the coloured perception of the 'viewer' is a different lens to that of the artist. However, perhaps the two eyes align when viewing toys, for who, when viewing something as simple as an animal on wheels, does not have the instinctive reaction of wanting to take a hold of the item and roll it back and forth or tie it to a string to pull behind you? The very object of toys is something so embedded in human social history as to transcend time and is an object that invites any beholder the enact their imagination upon the object. It is toys and their highly social history that shape the creative art force that is the human imagination, honed during childhood and exerted in adulthood through the act of invention. Although by no means are toys the reason humanity created such things as the wheel, chariot and wagon, it is undeniable that through play such ideas and options were explored, whether by the child putting animal and wheel together, or by adults trying to think of an engaging object for a child and stumbling across a previously unthought of technology. Their agency as the playmates of children has remained constant for millennia, transcending cultural contexts and suggesting that this timeless motif of the moving animal is part of the shared human art of agency through play.

Bibliography

Sources

- Baxendall, L. (1972). (Ed.) *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*. Pelican. Harmondsworth
- Duthie, I. (2021). *Hedgehog on Wheels*. Available at: <https://www.portraitofaplaything.com/work/8-hedgehog-on-wheels> [Last Accessed: 24/03/2023]
- Firth, R. 'Art and Anthropology' in (Eds.) Coote, J. & Shelton, A. (1994) *Anthropology Art and Aesthetics*. Clarendon Press. Oxford. (Pgs.15-39)
- Gell, A. (1998). *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford University Press. Oxford
- Lopes, D. Mcl. (2014). *Beyond Art*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.
- Kamp, K. A. (2001). 'Where Have All the Children Gone?: The Archaeology of Childhood' in *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, Vol. 8, No.1
- Mammas, & Spandidos, D. A. (2012). 'A 3,000-year-old child's toy' in *European Journal of Pediatrics*, 171(9), 1413–1413. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00431-012-1790-9> [Last Accessed: 24/03/2023]
- Milks, A. Lew-Levy, S. Lavi, N. Friesem, D. E. Reckin, R. (Milks et al.) (2021). 'Hunter-gatherer children in the past: An archaeological review' in *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, 64. 101369 [put weblink]
- Mursell, I. (No Date). 'Just 'toying' with wheels?'. Available at: <https://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/aztefacts/just-toying-with-wheels>. [Last Accessed: 24/03/2023]
- Nguyen, C. Thi, (2020) *Games: Agency As Art*, Thinking Art. Oxford University Press
- Price, S. (1989). 'Primitive art in Civilised Places'. Chicago; Chicago university Press.
- Ried, F. Lew-Levy, S. Johannsen, N. N. Lavi, N. & Anderson, M. M. (2022) 'Toys as Teachers: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Object Use and Enskillment in Hunter-Gatherer Societies' in *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*. Vol. 30, pgs. 31-63
- Sommer, & Sommer, D. (2017). 'Archaeology and developmental psychology: a brief survey of ancient Athenian toys' in *American Journal of Play*, 9(3), 341–355.
- Sterelny, K. (2021) 'Veiled agency? Children, innovation and the archeological record' in *Evolutionary Human Sciences*, 3, e12
- Tacopino, J. (2018). '5,000-year-old toy chariot discovered in Turkey'. New York Post (18th October 2018). Available at: <https://nypost.com/2017/10/18/5000-year-old-toy-chariot-discovered-in-turkey/> [Last Accessed: 24/03/2023]
- Wilkie, L. (2000). 'Not Merely Child's Play: Creating a historical archaeology of children and childhood' in Derevenkski, J. S. (Ed.) *Children and Material Culture*. Routledge. London. (Pgs. 100- 113)

Visual Material:

Fig:

1. Goki. (2023) 'Goki Pull Along Alvah Horse'. Available at: <https://smallkind.co.uk/products/goki-pull-along-alvah-horse>
2. Matilda's Anthropology Blog (MAB) (2008). 'Just when was the wheel invented, and by whom?'. Available at: https://mathildasanthropologyblog.wordpress.com/2008/11/19/just-when-was-the-wheel-invented-and-by-whom/?utm_medium=google [Last Accessed: 22/03/2023]
3. (& 4.) 'Jouet' (1500-1100BCE). [Bitumen and Limestone]. At: Paris, Louvre; Department of Oriental Antiquities; SB 2908; SB 2905.
Images available at: <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010128127> ;
<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010128126> [Last Accessed: 24/03/2023]
5. Mursell, I. (N.D.) 'Wheeled dog figurine made of obsidian'. Available at: https://www.mexicolore.co.uk/images-1/122_02_2.jpg [Last Accessed: 24/03/2023]
6. Mammas, & Spandidos, D. A. (2012). 'A 3,000-year-old child's toy'. *European Journal of Pediatrics*, 171(9), 1413–1413. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00431-012-1790-9> [Last Accessed: 24/03/2023]
7. Laskow, S. (2017). 'Found: A 5,000-Year-Old Toy Chariot'. Atlas Obscura. Available at: <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/found-a-5000yearold-toy-chariot> [Last Accessed: 24/03/2023]
8. Tacopino, J. (2018). '5,000-year-old toy chariot discovered in Turkey'. New York Post (18th October 2018). Available at: <https://nypost.com/2017/10/18/5000-year-old-toy-chariot-discovered-in-turkey/> [Last Accessed: 24/03/2023]