

AN UNKNOWN GAME FROM KERAMEIKOS

Around three of the four sides of the base for a funeral monument of a young athlete in the cemetery of Kerameikos exhibited in the Athens National Museum¹, athletic scenes with nude young men are presented in relief.

The right and left sides represent chariots and hoplites.

On the front side six young men are engaged in an interesting but not very well-known game – two of them in the center, with hooked sticks and a small stone ball, and two more on each side, also holding hooked sticks, as shown in the picture below.



In ancient times the game was known as κερητιζειν, from the shape of the sticks carried by the players. No details, however, are known about the way the game was played and no satisfactory explanation has been given so far².

¹ Athens NM 3477. This base, which is dated towards the end of the VI century B.C., was discovered in the Themistoclean wall of Athens in 1922.

² An article by Georghios P. Oikonomos (*Κερητιζοντες*, “Archaeologikon Deltion” 6, 1920-1921, 56-59), deals mainly with the manuscript reading in the life of Isocrates by Plutarch, ch. 4, κελητισοι or κερητισοι. Oikonomos argues for the seconf reading. Although he refers to a game described by a XIV-century Byzantine author, he offers no solution as to how this game was played. The game is also referred to, but with no detailed explanation, by Chr.

There is no literary reference to this game. Some have thought that it was a kind of hockey.

We should take notice in the first place that before societies became mechanized and industrialized, games – not merely athletic ones – were traditionally practiced and played on religious or kindred occasions.

I remember, having been born and brought up in a small village in central Cyprus, called Menoiko, that each year, during the Easter holidays, boys and girls as well as young men and women gathered every day in the church courtyard, playing different games for hours on end. Games were also played, usually by young boys and girls, on other particular days throughout the year.

It must be remarked that in the village itself as well as in its surroundings Mycenaean tombs and vases have been discovered, proving the existence of a Mycenaean settlement in the area. It should also be reminded that in the vicinity of the village an area bears the name “Hellenes”, i.e. “Greeks”, where Mycenaean vases have also been found.

The village’s very location shows that an ancient Mycenaean settlement is quite probable, not to say certain: a low hill between two rivers, with a fertile plain nearby. As it is located in a rather isolated area, it is quite normal that habits and games could survive throughout the centuries, especially through the support of religious celebrations.

Games are most easily preserved, since they are connected with children and youngsters, as well as with religious and social events.

Unfortunately, the so-called “development” in society’s social and other activities in the second half of the last century has brought about many changes, and particularly the giving up, and the breaking with, traditions that had endured for thousands of years.

One of the games played by young men in my village was exactly similar to the one shown in the picture. In Cyprus it was called “shoiros”, corresponding to the common-Greek word χοῖρος, that is “pig”. The game was played by several young men distributed into two opposing groups. The number of players was not defined, but depended on how many youngsters were willing to play. They held wooden sticks exactly similar to those in the picture, usually made of olive-tree wood. A hole was dug in the ground, as in golf games. One team was to defend the hole, preventing the other one from ‘scoring’ by pushing the stone ball into the hole – which was of course their object. The sticks were used for this purpose. The members of the attacking team were to push the ball around with their sticks, and pass it to their team-

mates, so they could manage to score. The defending team was naturally to hinder their efforts. After the attacking team had reached a definite amount of goals, the two teams changed positions. An important rule was that the ball had to be pushed around on the ground, not made to fly from one player to the other. This was probably the reason why the game received the name mentioned above.

Obviously, this game has nothing to do with hockey. It rather appears to be a combination of golf and hockey – and its roots go back to Mycenaean times.

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ABSTRACT:

Explanation of the rules of an ancient game portrayed in a Greek funeral relief, based on its survival in a village at Cyprus with archaeological evidence of a Mycenaean settlement.

KEYWORDS:

Greek archaeology, funeral relief, athletic games, Menoiko (Cyprus).