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Editor: Eileen M. Murphy

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Abstract
This paper presents the preliminary results of an investigation into the extent to which evidence for Late Medieval sub-seigniorial rural children’s play might be observable in the archaeological record. It first considers whether children in the Medieval period are likely to have engaged in play, and where they spent their time. Drawing on evidence from a range of disciplines including history, art history, folklore and archaeology it then investigates the nature of the activities likely to have been carried out during play and considers their likely physical manifestations. Excavations of three rural settlement sites in southern England are then examined in order to establish whether any features recorded during excavation correspond to those which would be expected to result from the sorts of play engaged in by Medieval rural children. The paper concludes by affirming why the correct identification of evidence for children’s activities is so important.

Keywords: children, play, Medieval, archaeology, history, folklore

Introduction
Anyone who has children of their own, or has spent time with the children of others, is unlikely to have failed to notice, firstly, how great an impact they can have on the space they occupy, and, secondly, how fleeting that impact can be. A home once studded and strewn with child-related paraphernalia will, in most cases, lose all trace of these within a remarkably short period of time as children leave childhood; the hidden places and play arenas that children carve out for themselves will, once abandoned, revert to their natural state almost as rapidly; the deeply-ingrained rules of groups and games will quickly fade from memory once they are no longer practised and their physical manifestations

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become invisible to the unknowing eye. If we can so easily lose the evidence for our own children’s childhood, what hope is there of recognising and retrieving it from the more distant past when the activities of children are less well-known and the material culture of childhood was so much less plentiful and durable?

The archaeological evidence for childhood and children is a once-neglected area of research which, in many parts of the world, is now beginning to receive more attention, with several recent publications highlighting the degree to which academic attention has begun to turn (e.g. Baxter 2005; Crawford and Lewis 2008; Heywood 2001; Kamp 2001; Sofaer Derevenski 2000; Wileman 2005). However, this attention is still patchy in its coverage and in this respect Medieval England is no exception. While a casual scan of publications over the last few years (e.g. Egan 1998; Heywood 2001; Orme 2001) might seem to refute this, more critical examination reveals the extent to which our current understanding of Medieval childhood and children comes predominantly from just two sectors of society: the urban and the aristocratic. This appears to demonstrate how similar children’s tastes in the Middle Ages seem to have been, to those of modern children, for objects such as dolls, imitation weapons, miniature objects and model buildings. This may be due at least in part to a tendency to look for those items which are familiar from the modern material culture of childhood but, be that as it may, the lives of Medieval children outside these social groups – elite and urban – is an aspect of the study of childhood in the past which, to date, remains much more obscure. This is regrettable as, throughout the Middle Ages, the vast majority of the population lived in the country and occupied sub-seigniorial ranks in society. In an attempt to redress the balance in favour of the invisible majority, this paper will consider the extent to which it is possible, and desirable, to identify in the archaeological record the activities of ordinary children in the Medieval countryside. In doing this, it will steer away from the osteological analysis of those who died during childhood, an area which has seen considerable recent study (e.g. Gowland 2007; Lewis 2007; Mays 2007), and seek to consider instead the evidence for the recreational activities of rural children while alive.

This area has seen little study to date, not least because Medieval rural settlement studies have tended to focus on issues such as the causes of settlement nucleation; the development of dispersed settlement patterns and the causes of settlement desertion and shift (Gerrard and Aston 2007; Jones and Page 2006; Lewis et al. 1997; Rippon 2008; Roberts and Wrathmell 2000; Williamson 2003). Various agents and processes of change and conservatism have been championed in the attendant debates over causation, including lords, peasants, climate and epidemic disease, the market and the agricultural cycle. Children, perhaps unsurprisingly, have not featured. However, it is not just in the search for these meta-narratives that children are invisible: most excavation reports of Medieval rural settlements make no mention at all of children or child-related activities in their presentation of the archaeological minutiae of the sites in which so much of the population live. Notably, this is even the case in archaeological studies which have sought a more ‘social’ or phenomenological approach to rural settlements, focussing on the lived experience (Altenberg 2003; Austin and Thomas 1990).

This is all in stark contrast to deductions we must make about the numbers of children living in any English Medieval village. In a period when 45–50% of all children died before reaching adulthood, but when the population nonetheless rose significantly
(perhaps tripling in less than 400 years), we have to infer (Chamberlain 1997, 249) that adults in any settlement would more often that not have been comfortably outnumbered by those under the age of twelve years. This is the age when (if they lived that long) girls might enter service and boys were required to enter a tithing (Goldberg 1992, 168–72) and which is used in this paper to define the end of childhood. To ignore such a large proportion of the population when interpreting archaeological investigations of rural settlements is at best impolite and at worst liable to lead to serious distortions in our understanding.

**Children and Play in Rural Medieval England**

In seeking to establish whether we can identify child-specific recreational activities in Medieval rural settlements, we first need to investigate whether such children did play and then, if we conclude in the positive, where they spent their time, what they did and what physical trace their activities could have left. One source of historical evidence for the first of these comes from coroners’ inquests. Like all historical documents, these cannot be taken to provide an accurate and complete record of events free of bias and partiality (Dunn 1996; Hunnisett 1978) and this is particularly the case where unexpected deaths are being investigated and some of those involved may have had an interest in concealing some of the facts. Notwithstanding this, they can be examined for the evidence they do record about the recorded activities of children. Furthermore, unlike many other sources, they do provide information from individuals belonging to a wide social range. Barbara Hanawalt (1986) has systematically analysed 3,118 fourteenth- and fifteenth-century coroners’ records from Bedfordshire, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire and Wiltshire, recording the circumstances surrounding fatal accidents, including those to which children fell victim: this provides an easily accessible source for a general consideration of whether Medieval rural children might be expected to have engaged in play.

**Did Medieval Rural Children Engage in Play?**

In seeking to place on record the circumstances surrounding an unexpected death, coroners’ inquests often record the activities children were engaged in when they met their deaths. Hanawalt (1986) has classified this evidence into eight main categories including ‘play’ (the others being agriculture, construction, craft, supplemental economic activity, household activities, transportation and personal activities) (Figure 1). Although the proportion of time spent in the various activities recorded in the coroners’ rolls should in no way be taken as exact indicators of the proportions of time spent by children generally in different activities, it is nonetheless reasonable to deduce from these sources that young children (under seven years of age) spent a considerable portion of their waking hours playing, and that even older children (7–12 years) spent significant amounts of time at play. The percentage of children engaged in play at the time of fatal accidents (Figure 2) is highest between the ages of two and six years, but remains above 20% for both sexes even in the older age range of seven to twelve years. These figures will have been even higher if activities such as ‘household’ (under
which Hanawalt includes cleaning and cooking) and transportation (including walking and fording bodies of water) were also in some cases associated with play. In contrast with the views of some authors (e.g. Ariès 1962), this evidence suggests that Medieval children were widely availed with the time and the space to involve themselves in self-generated recreational activities. Thus we are justified in proceeding to the next step of our enquiry: considering where children spent their time.

Where Might Medieval Children Have Gone to Play?

An awareness of where children went to play is crucial if we are to know where we might expect to find physical evidence for play, if it survives. Hanawalt’s (1986) data are also illuminating here, as coroners’ records often note where children were at the time of the incident which led to their death (Figure 3). Again, this data cannot be taken to indicate the exact amount of time that children spent in different places: ponds, streams and rivers, for example, feature particularly frequently in the records.

Figure 1: Graphs showing activities engaged in at time of fatal incident for male children (upper table) and female children (lower table; after Hanawalt 1986).
Figure 2: Graph showing percentage of children engaged in play at time of fatal incident, by age (after Hanawalt 1986).

Figure 3: Graph showing location at time of fatal incident for male children (upper table) and female children (lower table; after Hanawalt 1986).
(especially for boys) but this must of course reflect their inherent danger for children rather than suggesting that boys between the ages of seven and twelve years spent nearly 40% of their time in water. What these records do provide, however, is an indication of the sort of places where Medieval children spent their time: it is clear from this that they ranged widely across both public and private space. We can infer that if we are to look for archaeological evidence for children’s recreational activities, we might reasonably examine both public and private areas of the rural landscape: on greens and in streets; in hedgerows and woods; in pastures and field margins and in shielings and hayricks. In particular, however, we can also observe that the home and other private space occur with notable frequency in coroners’ records for children of all ages and surmise that these were areas where children spent significant amounts of time, even if the exact proportions are impossible to determine accurately. Similar patterns have been noted cross-culturally in studies of children’s play (Baxter 2005, 59–72; Schwartzman 1978).

We can now move on to our next question: whether and, if so, then how children’s play might manifest itself in the archaeological record of Medieval rural English communities. In order to explore this, we must first try to establish what Medieval rural children did while at ‘play’.

What Sort of Play Might Medieval Rural Children have Engaged in?

The evidence for play is typically considered in scholarly literature under two headings – ‘toys’ (i.e. objects) and ‘games’ (i.e. activities). This division is, however, rather unhelpful as these two terms are not in fact of the same order – toys are better understood as a sub-set of games. All children’s play involves activities which are in effect games, but only some of it requires objects: an object without an associated activity (even if this activity is only a possibility in the child’s mind) is of no use in a child’s play. An object is a toy if it is played with – it is the activity which defines the object. But it is identifying the activity which poses the most challenges for the archaeologist: while children’s toys are a very uncommon (but not unknown) element in museum catalogues and archaeological finds reports from Medieval settlements, other evidence for children’s activities is almost never noted. And it is by studying the activities that children generate for themselves, rather than the toys that are made for them by adults, that we can see childhood unmediated by adult ideologies (Wilkie 2000, 101–6).

As the archaeological evidence for rural Medieval children’s play has been, as noted above, so elusive, it is both instructive and essential to consider other sources of information which may open our eyes to the potential of the archaeological record for the study of children’s play. One of these is contemporary art. As with historical records, this cannot be taken to provide a complete and unbiased record of Medieval life (see, for example, Camille 1998), but they do provide glimpses and clues which are not available from any other sources. Illustrations in English Medieval books of hours, such as the Luttrell Psalter (early fourteenth-century; London, British Library, Additional MS 42130; Backhouse 1989) or the Bedford Hours (1423; London, British Library, Additional MS 18850; Backhouse 1990), often depict the minutiae of daily life including, often as marginalia, those of children’s activities. The Golf Book book
of hours (London, British Library, Add. Ms. 24098), illustrated by Simon Bening c. 1530–40 (Kren and McKendrick 2003, 477–8), includes several exceptionally detailed bas-de-page depictions of playing children. Within a century, artists such Pieter Breughel (Kinderspiele (Children’s Games), 1560) and Experiens Silleman (Kinderspel, 1628), feature crowds of children engaged in a wide range of recreational activities including leapfrog, headstands, ‘follow my leader’, somersaults, swimming, marbles, tops, hoops, windmills, hobby horses, playing shop, building with brick, making mud pies, hanging from railings and games which are today less familiar such as ‘wink-egg’ and ‘plum tree’ (Burton 1996, 18–19). Breughel’s painting, in particular, includes more than 200 children engaged in more than ninety different games in a scene almost entirely free of adults. Neither of these images should be read as photographic images of real-life scenes, of course, but they do provide a visual record of a large number of recreational activities that the artists were familiar with from contemporary children’s play. Many of the activities depicted can be identified with those referred to in the occasional Medieval written sources (literary and historical) which contain references to children’s recreational activities, reviewed recently by Orme (2001, 176–81) and Heywood (2001, 92–4; 112–5). These substantiate the possibility that these early Post-Medieval games were also current in the Middle Ages, but for detailed descriptions of exact rules and modus operandi we need to examine collections made at various dates by folklorists and social historians of ‘traditional’ children’s games (e.g. Bett 1929; Daiken 1949; Gomme 1984; Opie and Opie 1969; 1977; 1992; Strutt 1903; Willughby 1672). The origins of these rules are rarely securely dated in the literature, much of which is itself of considerable antiquity and not referenced to modern standards, but nonetheless is useful for the details it provides for the rules of pre-modern children’s play, which can in turn provide us with clues as to the possible physical traces this play could have left.

For the purpose of identifying their likely physical signature, children’s recreational activities can be divided into four categories: 1. those that used no physical objects at all; 2. those that used purpose-made objects (conventionally-defined toys such as dolls and hobby horses); 3. those that used existing objects or features unaltered and 4. those that adapted the physical environment in which they take place.

1. **Play Making no Use of Physical Objects**

This category of play is, of course, effectively unidentifiable in the archaeological record. Accounts and depictions of activities such as hide and seek (Daiken 1949), chasing, counting and kissing games (Opie and Opie 1969, 62–123), dare games, skating, sand play (AD 1150s; Orme 2001, 175), swimming (c. AD 1500; Collins and Davis 1991, 77), blind man’s buff (early sixteenth century; Collins and Davis 1991, 81), piggyback wrestling (fourteenth century; Backhouse 1989, 60), playing with animals (fourteenth/fifteenth century; Hanawalt 1986, 183), tree climbing (late fifteenth century; Backhouse 1989, 8), dancing (late fifteenth century; Backhouse 1997, 213) and chasing feathers (fourteenth/fifteenth century; Hanawalt 1986, 181) and butterflies (AD 1344; Daiken 1949, fig. 58) remind us of the kinds of archaeologically invisible activities pursued by ordinary children in the Medieval countryside.
2. Play Using Purpose-made Objects

The second category of play, that which uses purpose-made artefacts, clearly has greater potential to be detectable in the archaeological record than those that do not, although this is, again, not without its complications: many games illustrated in Medieval manuscripts which involved objects, including activities such as tennis (Daiken 1949), golf, hockey (c. AD 1450; Collins and Davis 1991, 117), bowls (c. AD 1410; Collins and Davis 1991, 76), dice (c. 1480–90; Kren and McKendrick 2003, 342) and backgammon (late fifteenth century; Backhouse 1989, 53), are most frequently depicted in association with adults rather than children. Although a detailed discussion of the relationship between adult and child play is beyond the scope of this paper, it is pertinent here to raise the possibility that children’s play activities may well have replicated or mimicked those of adults, although it must be stressed that identifying child agency in the use of such items which may also, or alternatively, have been used by adults, is clearly fraught with difficulties.

Object-using traditional games more exclusively associated with children include role-playing games using toys such as dolls, miniatures and hobby horses; rope games such as skipping and swinging (recorded from Classical times onwards by authors such as Virgil, Ovid and Homer) and skittles and precursors of football (played on the bank of the Boyne in Ireland by the mid seventeenth century; Daiken 1949, 27). If made of organic material such objects would, however, rarely survive into the archaeological record, or might be so altered by the taphonomic process as to be unrecognisable as toys if found: an early sixteenth-century Flemish book of hours showing children snowballing (Collins and Davis 1991, 131) perhaps epitomises the frustratingly evanescent nature of some of the physical evidence for this category of play. Some grounds for optimism in the search for children’s toys do exist, however, as the number of known finds of Medieval children’s toys is rising due to the success of the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) in recording items discovered by users of metal detectors (Egan 1998; Portable Antiquities Scheme). However, it remains the case that identification of objects related to children’s play remains uncommon away from towns and high-status sites. In fact, simple noise-making objects such as buzz-bones, bone whistles, jew’s harps, and other items such as spinning tops and pottery gaming pieces are the only plausibly identifiable recreational objects that turn up with any frequency on Medieval rural settlement sites (although the PAS may well alter this picture in the future). All of these could, of course, have been used by adults as well as by children.

3. Play Using Unmodified Physical Elements

The third category of play considered here also uses physical ‘props’, but in a manner which involves no enduring physical modification to existing natural or anthropogenic objects. These include games to show strength and power such as stone throwing, mentioned in the sixteenth century (Horman 1519), and sticks and branches used unmodified as simple hobby horses (Orme 2001, 174–5) or to make see-saws created by placing a branch across a rock (Daiken 1949). Eminences such as hayricks, dunghills, mounds or rocks were used in activities ranging from variants of ‘king of the castle’
(Daiken 1949, 12; Opie and Opie 1969, 233–4) to target practice (Hanawalt 1986, 185). Such un-modificatory use is inevitably difficult to identify using traditional archaeological interpretational strategies, although a more phenomenological approach may well be a more productive means of opening up the possibilities of such secondary use. Thus, for example, a feature such as the prominent Bronze Age barrow sited just outside and above the Medieval village of Lake in Wiltshire (Figure 4), which was remodelled as an ornamental prospect mound after the village was deserted, may reasonably be considered likely to have had another, quite distinctive use as a place of play for children living in the adjacent settlement in the Middle Ages. It is notable that the mound on which three children are shown playing in Breughel's Children's Games is strikingly similar to the one surveyed at Lake. Another sub-adult use for such eminences is suggested by one coroner's report for Bedfordshire which recorded a boy using a dunghill as a target for practicing archery (Hanawalt 1986, 185). Other play involving unmodified physical props include games of skill and dexterity such as 'handy-dandy' which involved hiding a small object such as a stone, cherry pit, hazelnut, acorn or bird’s egg in hands (Orme 2001, 176); and knucklebones, also known as tali, jackstones or fivestones, which is widely known from the Classical period onwards. It was played with between three and five stones or small bones, such as metatarsals or metacarpals, (clearly identifiable as such below the scene for October in Simon Bening’s Golf Book (1530–40; British Library Additional Ms 24098 f. 27b; Backhouse 1997, 231) and also visible on Breughel’s Children’s Games) which were thrown up in the air and caught again (Daiken 1949, 35). Stones, supposed to have been used in such games, have been found in Irish crannogs in holes near fireplaces (Kinahan 1884, 266).
4. Play Involving Modification of the Play Arena

The fourth category of recreational activity comprises activities which did involve some degree of adaptation – construction, deconstruction, clearance or excavation – in order to create a suitable arena for the game. In a number of cases, folklorists’ accounts detail the ways in which children’s play required this, and summaries of some of these will now be presented, drawing attention to the physical modifications required. Many games which are recorded in Medieval documents or depicted in Medieval manuscript illustrations (Daiken 1949, fig. 5) appear similar to those whose rules are recorded by folklorists, mostly working in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries (Gomme 1984; Kinahan 1884; Strutt 1903), although there are notable exceptions which are significantly earlier (e.g. Willughby 1672). Many of these games required the creation of artificial features such as stumps, stations and bases.

**Stones**

In the Irish game ‘stones’ (which has some similarity to the modern game of rounders and can be traced back to before c. 1750; Daiken 1949, 24) a play arena was created by setting up a circle of upright stones equal to the number of players on each team (Daiken 1949, 24; Kinahan 1884, 264). One player in the centre had to try and hit each stone in turn with a stick or (less commonly in the earlier period) a ball. When a stone is hit, all the hitter’s team players had to change places. Each stone was defended by other team players with stick or hand (if a ball is being used). Players were out if the stone was hit, their stick was caught or they were hit while running.

**Lobbers**

‘Lobbers’ has similarities to the modern game of cricket (whose 22-yard wide pitch is incidentally supposed to be based on the four perch width of the standard acre of Edward I; Bett 1929, 5–6). Lobbers required the creation of two physical features or stations which were marked by stones or holes, and defended by a batter and one other player. The lobber threw a stick, and any batter who hit it had to change places with the other defender. The batter or defender was ‘out’ if the ball lodged in the hole or hit the stone, or if the stick (or ball) was either caught or hit the stone while players were changing places.

**Tip and Run**

‘Tip and run’ is a game which is depicted on the Medieval cloister benches of Gloucester Cathedral, leading to speculation that it may have been played in the cloisters by children sent there to be educated. As with Lobbers, the rules can be traced back to least c. 1750 (Daiken 1949, 26). It was a game of individual prowess, rather than a team game. A large flat stone was stood on edge, supported by a stick or other stones. A stick (or ball) was bowled at it from a point marked by a smaller stone placed flat on the ground several yards away. A batter, who hit the ball, had to make as many runs as possible between the two stones before the ball was retrieved.
Throwing Games

Throwing games such as ‘quates’ or quoits required the construction of a target which involved laying a large stone termed a ‘jock’ flat on the ground, after which each player threw three or four smaller stones at it, trying to get them closest to, or on top of, the jock. Measuring was done with a straw. Cherry stones were mentioned as play items by the poet John Audelay in the 1420s (Orme 2001, 176), and could involve aiming cherry stones, cobnuts or other small objects at a target of a pile of the same objects in order to win all those dislodged. Variants of cherry stones involved aiming these missiles, as well as pebbles and broken pieces of pottery, into holes in the ground (Orme 2001, 176). Stones could be used in all these games, as well as for collecting, and those of special character, particularly those that are unusually round, smooth, shiny or coloured, are likely to have been preferred (Daiken 1949, 23).

Hopscotch

Hopscotch or ‘heck-a-beds’ required a series of variably arranged geometrically-shaped compartments (or ‘beds’) to be marked out on the ground. A small flat stone or broken piece of pottery was thrown into the first bed, whereupon the player had to kick it back over the start line while hopping without touching any of the drawn (scotched) lines.

Tops

Some games required the creation of a clear, smooth arena of play. Tops are well-known from the Classical period onward (Daiken 1949, 49–55; Orme 2001, 168) and depicted in Medieval manuscripts such as the Roman d’Alexandre in 1344 (Daiken 1949, fig. 18). Wooden objects, which could have functioned as spinning tops, have been identified in water-logged deposits on Medieval sites such as York (Morris 2000). Most tops were made of wood, and whipped to keep them spinning (an idea which may be developed from the use of spindles or fire drills). A smooth surface was required for tops to spin satisfactorily: in Breughel’s Children’s Games, tops is the only game shown being played on a paved stone surface. Competitive games using tops, for which very specifically-adapted play-surfaces were required, include ‘Peg in the ring’ (Daiken 1949, 53) in which a circle of c. 1 m diameter was drawn on smooth firm ground, after which players had to keep their tops in the ring and try and knock others’ tops out (the recent playground craze ‘Beyblades’ is the most recent reinvention of this game). ‘Chip-stones’ (Daiken 1949, 54), a game usually played by two players, involved drawing out two parallel lines, on one of which were placed a number of small roundish chip-stones (which should be as smooth and polished as possible). Tops were tossed from a wooden spoon or some similar object at the chip-stones with the aim of pushing them from one line across the other.

Marbles

Marbles, which are known from the Roman period onward (Daiken 1949 165–74; Orme 2001, 178), could be played with hazelnuts, pebbles, birds’ eggs or made of clay, wood, metal or even stone, as well as glass, and could be made by children themselves out of clay rolled, dried and fired. Medieval marbles have been found near Salisbury at Old
Sarum, Wiltshire, and Clarendon Palace, Wiltshire (David Algar 2005, pers. comm.). Like tops, marbles requires an arena of smooth firm ground, across which the marble would be propelled by flicking it with the thumb, while keeping the middle joint of the forefinger on the ground, with the aim of hitting an opponent’s marble, either to win it or to propel it away from a target.

**Tethered Animal Games**

Children’s recreation could also modify its arena by creating holes in the ground. Posts, which would have had to be set into holes in the ground, were used to support targets used for tilting practice (Orme 2001, 181–3; although this was a higher-status activity, it is possible that non-mounted variants were played by others) and stakes were used to restrain animals used for entertainment. Bear-baiting was enjoyed by adults, and although dangerous (Hanawalt (1986) notes a child, asleep in bed, killed by an escaped bear), children joined with adults watching as these animals were attacked by dogs while tethered to a stake in the ground (late fifteenth century; Backhouse 1989, 59). Cock-fighting is frequently documented as a pastime enjoyed by older children and depicted in manuscript illustrations (Orme 2001, 185–6): this could involve tying the combatants to stakes or marking out circles as fighting arenas. Another game depicted by Jan Amos Comenius in 1658 involved a small hoop supported on a stick stuck into the ground (Burton 1996, 18; Orme 2001, 177).

**Cock Stele**

Another game, also involving poultry, which older children could pursue was cock stele, recorded by Thomas More c. 1500 (Orme 2001, 179), which involved throwing a stick at a cockerel buried up to its head in a hole dug into the ground.

**The Physical Signature of Medieval Children’s Play**

An awareness of the history, rules and mechanics of these games provides a revelation when re-examining images such as Breughel’s *Children’s Games* (Cahan and Riley 1980, 50–1; Artchive). Numerous objects, in particular stones, become glaringly apparent, the significance and purpose of whose placement is otherwise easy to miss. It is immediately evident that if all the children depicted in this scene departed, a range of physical objects would be left, some of which would be capable of survival into the archaeological record (Figure 5). From such evidence, it would be possible to reconstruct, or at least postulate the undertaking of a significant number of the activities in which the children had been engaged. While this paper does not extend to a wide review of anthropological evidence for children’s play, the fact that children’s play can and does have a physical signature has been noted in studies of contemporary situations (e.g. Baxter 2005, 5; Bonnichsen 1973; Hammond and Hammond 1981).

**The Search for Archaeological Evidence for Medieval Children’s Play within Rural Settlements**

We can now return to the question of the extent to which evidence for children’s play may survive in Medieval rural settlements. Knowledge of the putative details of
children’s games in the Middle Ages suggests that evidence for this is most likely to appear in domestic spaces, and show up as mounds, hollows, holes, cleared spaces and arrangements of stones, all of varying shapes and sizes and occurring singly or in particular grouped arrangements. Associated objects may be stones of particularly smooth or round appearance.

Most archaeological sites, of course, contain numerous examples of such features and ‘finds’, some of which will have been painstakingly recorded and others overlooked. The function of such items is usually considered impossible to ascertain and is either glossed over or tentatively linked to some kind of ‘light industrial’ or ‘ritual’ activity. Published reports of three Medieval rural settlement sites will now be examined, in order to consider the extent to which the excavated evidence contains features which are compatible with those we should expect from children’s play, in the areas we could reasonably expect to find it, namely near domestic buildings. It should be noted that the sites discussed below have been selected because they are rural settlement sites with high-quality published plans familiar to this author, not because they are considered in any way exceptional in terms of the survival of child-related evidence, which is minimal in all three (and in this respect is typical of Medieval settlement excavation reports). It should be emphasised that children’s activities are not mentioned in any of the publications.

**Gomeldon, Wiltshire**

The shrunken Medieval village of Gomeldon in south Wiltshire was excavated between 1963 and 1968, and published in 1986 (Musty and Algar 1986). Investigation focussed on an area of earthwork remains to the south of the present village, where a total
of nine buildings were excavated and found to comprise the remains of houses and ancillary buildings spanning the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. The only evidence noted in the published report for the presence of children is an infant burial inside Building 7b (Musty and Algar 1986, 143, 168–9, fig. 9) and part of an infant skeleton found in the yard between Buildings 3 and 4 (Musty and Algar 1986, 138–9). However, careful examination of the plans, in the light of the evidence presented above, shows a number of features which correlate well with the manifestations expected of Medieval rural children’s play. Building 5, identified as a barn, has a scatter of nine small holes arranged in an apparently haphazard way outside the building close to its north wall (Figure 6). These are all of similar size, less than 10 cm across. They are mentioned by the excavators in the published report, where no explanation is offered for them, although a linear arrangement of similar, slightly larger holes inside the barn is interpreted as having held wattle partitions sub-dividing the barn. Complex 6 contained two buildings, one of which was robbed to construct the other: numerous small holes, just a few centimetres across, cluster within and to the west side of Building 6a (Figure 7). These are described as randomly-placed stakes although some pattern, in the form of pairings or short lines, can be postulated on the basis of a visual examination of the plans. The function of these holes is enigmatic, although their positioning and quantity would preclude use as fences. Similar features within Building ‘a’ (circled ‘b’ on Figure 7) may result from similar activities, possibly after Building ‘a’ had fallen out of use. Such features are notably absent from the north-east of the complex. Complex 7, containing three buildings and a yard, also has a dense scatter of similarly small, and apparently randomly-placed, stake holes east of the easternmost building (Fig. 8). Each of the groupings of stake holes share common characteristics in that they are clustered together; restricted to part of the complex they occupy and lie on the edge
of the complexes, up against the boundaries. These spaces, tucked away behind the buildings and private spaces of existing or former domestic complexes, are exactly those which the coroners’ inquests lead us to expect children to gravitate towards. The excavated features correlate well with those we could expect to be created by games such as Cherry stones, Comenius’ hoop game or possibly variants of Lobbers.

**Tattenhoe and Westbury, Buckinghamshire**

Tattenhoe and Westbury in Buckinghamshire are two Medieval villages excavated in 1984–8 by the Milton Keynes Archaeological Unit in advance of the construction of the new town of Milton Keynes. The sites were published in a single volume in 1995 (Ivens et al. 1995). Artefacts from the sites, which may relate to children’s play, include a buzz bone (Westbury cat. no. 1834; Ivens et al. 1995, fig. 182), a bone whistle (Westbury cat. no. 1839; Ivens et al. 1995, fig. 183), a jew’s harp (Westbury cat. no. 223; Ivens et al. 1995, fig. 151) and small pottery discs (Westbury cat. no. 1817 and 1819; Tattenhoe cat. no. 565; Ivens et al. 1995, figs. 181 and 182). A Y-shaped antler object (Westbury cat. no. 1840; Ivens et al. 1995, fig. 184) could have been a simpler version of the hoop-shaped game depicted by Comenius (1658) or a sling-shot.

Beyond this small number of objects, however, the exemplary detailed stone-by-stone recording of Medieval occupation areas at Westbury and Tattenhoe provides a wealth of further opportunities to note features which could relate to children’s recreation. Crofts 3 and 4 at Tattenhoe contain concentrations of stake holes very similar to those noted above at Gomeldon, such as can be seen in Figure 9 ‘b’. Groups of larger holes are also visible, particularly at the areas labelled ‘a’, ‘c’ and ‘d’ in Figure 9, in which
Figure 9: Archaeological features recorded at Tattenhoe, Buckinghamshire, Area B, Period 2, Crofts 3 and 4 (after Ivens et al. 1995; copyright Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society) annotated to show positions of stake holes and other small hollows.

Figure 10: Archaeological features recorded at Westbury, Buckinghamshire, Croft 6b (after Ivens et al. 1995; copyright Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society) annotated to show positions of small holes (‘a’ and ‘b’ on plan).
some patterns of pairing and regular spacing can plausibly be discerned. These features may have lain within buildings or outside them, or alternatively have been created within buildings that had fallen into disuse. At Westbury the inner enclosure of Croft 6b (Figure 10) contains two small holes, 30–40 cm in diameter, and c. 2 m apart (Figure 10, ‘a’ on the plan). These would fit the requirements for stations for games such as Lobbers or Stones, or could have been used for cherry stone tossing games (or even for burying cockerels!). Mention of cherry stone games prompts the question whether another distinctive type of minor feature present at Westbury, namely upturned but largely intact pots set into the ground (Figure 11) may have been targets for indoor throwing games. Ten of these were found, of which the authors remark: ‘No evidence was found at Westbury which explains the function’ (Ivens et al. 1995, 275). Explanations inconclusively offered include specialised (but unspecified) craft activities, drains, witches’ pots, grain storage and fermentation devices – but no consideration is given to any possible recreational function, adult or sub-adult (Moorhouse 1981).

A rather different kind of feature occurs at Tattenhoe in Croft 1 (Figure 12), where a 3.5 m by 1.75 m diamond-shaped area south of Building 4 is notably clear of stones (Figure 12, ‘a’), as are three sub-circular areas tucked up against the sides of Buildings 4 and 5 (Figure 12, ‘b’ and ‘c’) which measure between 1 m and 2 m in diameter. These are exactly what we would expect a smooth ‘arena’ for games, such as tops or marbles, to look like. These locations could alternatively (or additionally) be associated with a version of skittles which is depicted taking place tight up against building walls by both Breughel (1560) and Silleman (1628). Numerous clear patches measuring just under 1 m in diameter within cobbled areas appear in Area B, Period 2, Crofts 3 and 4 at Tattenhoe (Ivens et al. 1995, 36, fig. 20) and in Westbury within Croft 9 to the south-east of Building 52262 (Ivens et al. 1995, 124, fig. 71), and at Crofts 12 and 13 within the Cobbled Surface 76102, south of Building 78010 (Ivens et al. 1995, 140, fig. 77).

Figure 11: Plan and section drawing of upturned buried Pot 76112 at Westbury, Buckinghamshire (after Ivens et al. 1995; copyright Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society).
Other evidence which correlates well with descriptions of children’s games involve stones which, as we have seen, are likely to have performed a significant role in a range of Medieval rural children’s play. Several examples of clustered scatters of stones can be seen in Crofts 12 and 13 in Westbury (Figure 13). At ‘d’ a small group of stones, measuring up to c. 5 cm in diameter, lie close to the footings for a wall, while at ‘b’ similar-sized pebbles form a tightly-clustered group. At ‘a’ and ‘d’, 5 cm pebbles are grouped with larger ones up to c. 10 cm in diameter, and are clustered adjacent to small hollows up to 30 cm in diameter. A similar cluster of small stones with a hollow is present at ‘e’. These all correlate closely with the traces we would expect of a throwing game using a hollow as a target. Any number of large stones are recorded on the published plans of both Tattenhoe (e.g. Area C, Period 2, Phase 1, Feature 7527; Ivens et al. 1995, 41, fig. 23) and Westbury (e.g. within Cobbled Surface 76102 and Crofts 12 and 13; Ivens et al. 1995, 140, fig. 77), which could have been used upright in Stones, Lobbers or Tip and Run, or, lain flat, as targets in Quoits.
Conclusion – the Identification of Archaeological Evidence for Children’s Play

It would be possible to continue in this vein almost indefinitely, citing more features and examining the records of more excavated sites, but within the scope of this paper the above examples are enough, I would suggest, to demonstrate that features equating to those to be expected of Medieval children’s play do survive in excavated Medieval rural settlements. We have already noted that rural Medieval settlements contained children, that those children played and that they played in ways that could have left physical traces. Now, perhaps, we have for the first time identified such traces. Of course it has not here been ‘proven’ that children created or used all or any of the features
under discussion – but such uncertainty is inherent in the nature of archaeological interpretation, particularly when dealing with transient activities and lost lore. It should be noted, however, that, in instances when similar features have been ascribed to ‘ritual’ or ‘industrial’ activity, there is rarely as close a correlation as has been noted here between expected and excavated patterns. The conclusion must surely be that children’s play is as at least as likely (if not more so) to explain the features examined above as is any other activity.

This conclusion is of critical importance, both for Medieval rural settlement studies and more widely. It demonstrates that the possible activities of children, and in particular their potential impact on Medieval archaeological remains, must be taken into account very much more widely than is presently the case. It also provides a much-needed shock to our established ways of thinking as we realise how completely we have wiped the sticky fingerprints of children off our views of the past. Given the close correlation between the expected archaeological manifestation of children’s games and features observable in the record, combined with the fact that children must have lived and played in these sites, it seems perverse in the extreme that they are so rarely cited as possible agents. It might be argued that such insubstantial traces as would be left by children’s games would hardly be likely to survive into the following day, let alone into the archaeological record, and in many cases this would, of course, have been the case. But it is indubitable that the archaeological evidence we can see at Gomeldon, Tattenhoe and Westbury does exist and is the result of some form of ‘light’ activity. If we continue to ignore the possibility that children could have been responsible for creating or modifying archaeological features, we risk distorting not only our view of the nature of Medieval rural childhood, but also of other aspects of society: the under-reporting of children’s play is, after all, as unhelpful as the over-reporting of light industrial or ritual activity. After all, think for a moment how a child-blind archaeologist might interpret a ‘circle of upright stones’ abandoned after an early Irish game of rounders ...

And, of course, this has a much wider significance. Across the world, in all periods, the populations of most settlements included children, in significant numbers. It seems highly likely, given the evidence examined above, that more archaeological evidence of their activities while alive has survived than is currently generally considered to be the case: therefore we must conclude that we are simply not seeing it, and the reason we are not seeing it is probably that we are not thinking about it (Sofaer Derevenski 1994). If this sounds familiar, it is because it forms an almost identical parallel with the situation regarding women’s activities in the archaeological record a generation ago (Sofaer Derevenski 1997, 193). For too long we have approached our study of the past as adults, thinking about adult lives, and too rarely looked down to notice the children who would surely swarm around us if we were able to travel back in time and visit a Medieval village. In the future it is imperative that we take more care to check the past for those sticky fingerprints.
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