



BALL GAMES IN ANCIENT ROME: TRIGON, PAGANICA, AND HARPASTUM AS PHYSICAL CULTURE AND PRE-MODERN TEAM SPORTS

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Abstract:

Ball games occupied an important place in ancient Roman physical culture, functioning not only as leisure activities but also as structured forms of exercise and military preparation. This study examines three principal Roman ball games—trigon, paganica, and harpastum—together with the characteristics of the balls used in each, drawing on literary, archaeological, and comparative historical sources. Trigon was primarily a skill-based throwing game involving three players arranged in a triangular formation. Using a small, tightly stuffed ball (pila trigonalis), players emphasized speed, coordination, and dexterity, particularly through left-handed catching and throwing. Literary accounts, especially those of Martial, highlight misdirection, rapid exchanges, and the prestige associated with technical mastery. The game's emphasis on agility and precision suggests its role in refining motor skills rather than physical dominance. Paganica, less frequently mentioned in ancient sources, occupied an intermediate position in terms of ball size and weight. Filled with feathers and heavier than the follis but larger than the trigon ball, the paganica appears to have supported moderate-intensity play, although the precise nature of the associated sport remains unclear. Despite limited references, it reflects the Roman tendency to differentiate physical exercises according to ball size and function. Harpastum stands out as the most physically demanding and well-documented Roman ball game. Derived from the Greek episkyros, it was a competitive team sport played with a small, hard ball on a marked rectangular field. Characterized by intense physical contact, rapid movement, and tactical coordination, harpastum required strength, endurance, and agility. Ancient authors frequently describe its violence and exhausting nature, and Roman military sources suggest it was used as training for soldiers. Together,

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these games illustrate the diversity of Roman ball sports and their integration into health practices, social life, and military training.

Keywords: Ancient Rome; ball games; trigon; paganica; harpastum; Roman physical culture; ancient sports history

1. Introduction

Ancient Romans participated in a wide range of sporting activities, including both outdoor and indoor events. Influenced by ancient Greek culture, the Romans adopted and practiced various Greek sports aimed at developing physical strength and endurance. Wealthy Romans owned extensive lands and specialized facilities within their residences, commonly referred to as *gymnasia* and *palaestrae*. Sporting activities held in these villas were regarded as significant status symbols among the elite. During the reign of Emperor Nero, public interest in sports increased considerably, and the first public gymnasium was established. Nero ruled Rome between 37 AD and 68 AD, a period marked by heightened patronage of sport. As a result, numerous large theatres and amphitheatres were constructed to host sporting events and brutal gladiatorial contests, which gradually became defining symbols of Roman culture.

It remains uncertain whether the ancient Romans engaged in sports such as tennis or football. Tennis is generally believed to have been invented by monks in northern France around 1100 AD, and later played in the 1500s. Its origins are traced to a French palm ball game known as *jeu de paume*, in which the ball was struck with the hand rather than with rackets (Marshall, 2010; Ermiş *et al.*, 2024).

Among the more peaceful sports practiced in ancient Rome was the ball game known as *harpastum*. The Romans described it as a small-ball game because the ball used was relatively small, comparable to a modern softball. This game originated from an earlier Greek sport called *Phaininda* and was closely related to *Episkyros*. *Harpastum* was played as a team sport on a rectangular field and functioned as a social and physical activity. Despite its popularity, it was never included in the Ancient Olympic Games (Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025a). In the Roman period, sports served multiple purposes, including entertainment, leisure, and military training. The public actively participated in sporting spectacles held in stadiums and circuses, which were monumental architectural structures of the era (Doğan & İmamoğlu, 2020; İmamoğlu & Koca, 2024).

2. Development and Conclusion

Ancient Romans were known to enjoy throwing and playing with balls of various sizes as a means of both entertainment and physical fitness. Although there is no evidence that they played modern sports such as tennis or football, Romans actively engaged in ball games using equipment such as the *pila* and *follis*. These games often involved players standing opposite one another and tossing the ball back and forth, resembling simple

catching exercises. Notably, physicians in ancient Rome frequently recommended physical activity, including ball games, as part of medical treatment and general health maintenance (Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025b). Despite their popularity, ball games occupy a relatively minor place in traditional descriptions of ancient sports. One reason for this is that ball games were not included in the official programs of major sporting festivals, such as those held at Olympia or other Panhellenic events.

Roman society, however, demonstrated a strong enthusiasm for ball games, which were commonly played in bath complexes and gymnasiums for recreational and health-related purposes. Reconstructing the rules of these games remains difficult due to limited and often ambiguous sources. Many modern interpretations found on popular websites overlook this complexity and tend to overemphasize supposed connections with contemporary sports, particularly football. Literary evidence from Roman authors highlights the ubiquity of ball games in daily life, especially among the elite. The satirist Martial and the letters of Pliny the Younger frequently mention ball playing, suggesting that it was a routine activity in Roman society during the late first and early second centuries AD. Seneca, in one of his letters, famously complains about the excessive noise emanating from a bathhouse beneath his lodging. Among the disturbances, he specifically mentions the *pilicrepus*, who loudly called out scores during ball games. Medical writers also paid considerable attention to ball games. The most influential of these was Galen, the prominent physician of the second century AD, whose work *On Exercise with the Small Ball* provides valuable insight into Roman attitudes toward physical activity. Galen strongly criticized professional athletes and trainers, arguing that excessive training, extreme intensity, and artificial enhancement harmed the human body and violated principles of good health. In contrast, he advocated moderate forms of exercise, particularly small-ball games, which he considered beneficial for maintaining physical balance and overall well-being. Ball games remain among the most widely played and watched sports in the twenty-first century, with football dominating popular culture in Europe and South America. Although England is often regarded as the birthplace of modern football, ancient Roman ball games exhibit notable similarities. One such game was *harpastum*, which shared characteristics with modern rugby. While historical descriptions do not allow for a precise reconstruction of its rules, it is generally understood that the objective involved advancing the ball beyond the opponent's line while preventing the opposing team from doing the same. Archaeological and artistic evidence further supports the cultural importance of ball games in Roman society.

A well-known example is a second-century AD tombstone from Sinj (modern-day Croatia) depicting a boy named Gaius Laberius holding a ball composed of hexagonal shapes strikingly similar to a modern football. Although the inscription states that the boy died at the age of seven—despite his mature appearance in the relief—the monument is often interpreted as a commemorative symbol of a beloved pastime. This artefact has become a source of regional pride and has even been cited as evidence of early football-like traditions within the Roman Empire and local pre-Roman populations. The tombstone's cultural significance was such that it appeared on the front page of a FIFA

newsletter in 1969. Additional artistic representations of ball games can be found in Roman bath complexes. For instance, a fresco dated to 81 AD in the Baths of Titus depicts Roman men engaged in ball play. Such images suggest that ball games were familiar, everyday activities, sufficiently common to be featured in public murals and decorative programs (Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025b; Güney and İmamoğlu, 2024). In conclusion, ball games played a significant yet often underappreciated role in Roman physical culture. Although they lacked formal institutionalization within major sporting festivals, these games were deeply embedded in daily life, health practices, and social interaction. Literary, medical, and artistic sources collectively demonstrate that ball games functioned as accessible, moderate forms of exercise that aligned with Roman ideals of health, leisure, and community engagement (Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025a).

2.1 Ball Types and Ball Games in Ancient Rome

In ancient Rome, three primary types of balls of differing sizes were used in sporting and recreational activities: pila, follis, and paganica. Each ball served a distinct function within Roman sporting culture and reflected the Romans' preference for dynamic, participatory forms of physical activity. The pila was a small ball and appears to have been the most commonly used ball in ancient Roman games. It was versatile and employed in various forms of ball play, particularly those involving throwing, catching, and striking. The follis was a much larger ball, typically inflated with air, often made from an animal bladder, and occasionally covered with leather for durability. Due to its size and lightness, the follis is sometimes considered a distant precursor to modern footballs or even beach balls, a suggestion reinforced by Rome's geographical proximity to the Lazio coast. Ancient texts also refer to a third type of ball known as the paganica, although details regarding its exact size, structure, or the specific rules of the game in which it was used remain unclear. While the pila and follis can be viewed as early counterparts to modern tennis balls and footballs in terms of size, Roman ball games differed significantly from modern racket-based sports. The ancient Romans preferred throwing, catching, hitting, or kicking balls using their hands, forearms, or feet rather than employing sticks or rackets (Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025b). Roman sporting culture relied on a limited but functional variety of balls for its core ball games. Several ancient literary sources, including *Liber Spectaculorum* by the Roman poet Martial (40–103 AD), provide valuable insights into both the construction of these balls and their practical use in sporting contexts. In Latin, the general term for a ball was pila, and three main variations were associated with specific sports. The follis ball was used in the game bearing the same name, the paganica ball corresponded to the similarly titled game, and the trigon ball was employed in both trigon and harpastum. The trigon ball is sometimes referred to as pila trigonalis or simply pila, reflecting different names for the same object. Modern scholar Bill Thayer, in a footnote discussing pila in relation to the game of harpastum, cautions against projecting modern assumptions onto ancient sports equipment. He notes that modern balls are expected to bounce, maintain perfect

roundness, and be smoothly pressurized with air or elastic materials. Such characteristics were not guaranteed in antiquity (Bıyık and Yazıcı, 2023a).

Roman balls varied in weight, flexibility, smoothness, and internal structure, yet these limitations did not deter Romans from enthusiastically engaging in ball games. Thayer emphasizes that ball games were enjoyed across age groups and social settings, from bathhouses and palaestrae to outdoor public spaces, underscoring the enduring appeal of ball play in Roman society (Varnica, 2024; Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025b). The *follis* deserves particular attention due to its size and unique playing style. It was generally made from an inflated animal bladder and sometimes wrapped in leather to prevent damage. Martial refers to the *follis* using the Latin adjective *plumea*, meaning “feathered” or “light,” likely emphasizing the ball’s lightness rather than suggesting that it was literally stuffed with feathers (Bridge, 2016). The game associated with the *follis* is not well documented, but available evidence suggests that it involved striking the ball into the air using the fist or forearm, possibly resembling aspects of modern volleyball. Some accounts indicate that players may have worn gloves to facilitate striking the ball and protect their hands. Despite these references, the rules and structure of the game remain largely unknown. Roman wall mosaics and artistic depictions frequently include representations of both *follis* and *paganica*, illustrating their presence in everyday recreational life. In some cases, the size of the ball depicted makes identification difficult, as it may resemble either a *paganica* or a *trigon*. Although the *trigon* is generally associated with a three-player game, some evidence suggests that it could also be played as a simpler two-player catching and striking activity. The use of the left hand in striking the ball is characteristic of *trigon*, supporting the interpretation that such depictions most likely represent this game rather than *paganica*. Overall, the *follis* is often compared to a modern volleyball, as it was struck with fists or forearms and kept airborne, preventing it from touching the ground. These ball games highlight the Romans’ emphasis on agility, coordination, and enjoyment rather than rigidly structured competition. Collectively, the evidence demonstrates that ball games occupied a meaningful place in Roman daily life, contributing to physical fitness, social interaction, and leisure within both private and public spaces (Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025b).

2.2 The Trigon Ball Game in Ancient Rome

Trigon, which can be described as a form of juggling ball game, is generally believed to have involved three players. In this game, a Roman ball was thrown among three individuals standing in a triangular formation. Players typically caught the ball with their right hand and threw it with their left, a practice that emphasized coordination and ambidexterity (Sazaloo, 2018). The *trigon* ball and the game itself are frequently depicted in Roman sculptures and mosaics, highlighting their cultural visibility. The *trigon* ball was approximately the size of a modern baseball and was tightly stuffed with materials such as hair or feathers. It was used specifically in a game bearing the same name. Three participants stood at the points of a triangle and passed the ball to one another, preferably using the left hand. Points were scored when an opposing player failed to catch the ball.

In some variations, more than one ball could be in play simultaneously, increasing the difficulty and dynamism of the game. Skilled players were particularly admired for their ability to throw and catch using the left hand.

The Roman poet Martial (40–104 AD) praised this skill in his epigrams, writing: *“If you can strike me with those famous left-handed blows, I am yours. Can’t you? The peasant returns the ball.”* Ancient literary sources also provide insight into the construction and aesthetic qualities of the trigon ball. Plato is said to have noted that balls were sometimes made in different colors to make them more attractive to children. Another Latin poet wrote, *“Feel free to fill it with the feathers of a fast-running deer until it weighs over two pounds,”* suggesting experimentation with internal materials to alter the ball’s weight. Artistic representations indicate that these balls were composed of leaf-shaped panels in varying colors, reflecting both craftsmanship and visual appeal. The balls used in trigon were constructed from flexible materials such as feathers, hair, or seeds wrapped in leather. Martial describes the ball as follows: *“Filled with feathers, this ball, which is difficult to manage, is not as soft as a bladder nor as hard as an ordinary ball.”* Reconstructions of the pila trigonalis suggest the use of soft, vegetable-tanned cowhide leather, consistent with materials available in antiquity and lacking artificial dyes (Trigonalis, 2018; Bıyık and Yazıcı, 2023b).

The trigon, sometimes referred to as pila trigonalis (literally *“triangular ball”*), was smaller than the paganica and tightly packed with hair, giving it a firm yet elastic interior. This construction made it particularly suitable for fast-paced throwing games requiring precision and quick reflexes. Based on sculptural evidence, the ball’s size closely resembles that of a baseball. The game itself involved three players positioned in a triangular arrangement, from which the name trigon is derived. The ball was passed from one player to another, although it remains unclear whether play followed a fixed directional pattern or allowed for variable throws. Notably, one player often used the left hand rather than the right, likely to increase the challenge and demonstrate skill. Striking the ball toward another player without first catching it was also considered a mark of expertise. Attempts to reconstruct the rules of trigon remain inconclusive. Some reconstructions suggest that six players formed two teams, with pairs positioned at each corner of the triangle. The front players initiated the game, while their partners stood behind them, ready to substitute. If a player dropped the ball, the teammate behind him replaced him, and play resumed. The objective was to maintain possession while deceiving opponents, with victory going to the pair that required the fewest substitutions. Misdirection appears to have been an essential element of the game, and in some cases, two balls may have been used simultaneously. Catching the ball with the left hand signified advanced skill, while transferring the ball from one hand to the other during play may have been used to confuse opponents. Throws could be executed in either clockwise or counterclockwise patterns, and striking the ball rather than catching it was regarded as a particularly skillful maneuver. According to Martial’s epigrams, a missed catch resulted in a point for the opposing side. Being struck by the ball and failing to catch it seems to have been part of the game’s objective. References to scorekeeping

suggest that complex scoring systems may have existed, possibly awarding higher points for left-handed catches or direct strikes. The trigon is sometimes referred to as the “*glass ball game*,” a title associated with the renowned player Ursus, who was said to have played with a glass ball and never dropped it, a testament to exceptional skill and control (Perez, 2015; Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025b).

2.3 Paganica

The paganica is the least documented of the three primary Roman balls and is mentioned only twice by the poet Martial. It was a medium-sized ball, positioned between the large follis and the smaller trigon. The paganica was filled with feathers, which made it heavier than the follis but still flexible. Although ancient texts provide limited direct information regarding the specific sport in which the paganica was used, comparative evidence suggests that it occupied a distinct place within Roman recreational ball games. A Greco-Roman relief dating to the fourth century BC depicts a ball consistent in size with the paganica, although the artistic style reflects stronger Greek influence. Despite the relative scarcity of literary references, a considerable amount of interpretive scholarship has emerged concerning both the paganica and its associated sporting practices.

2.4 Harpastum and Its Ball

Harpastum is frequently listed as a fourth type of ball in Roman sporting culture; however, this classification is misleading. The ball used in harpastum appears to have been identical to the ball used in trigon, as indicated by overlapping descriptions and the shared use of the term pila. In Latin, pila simply means “*ball*,” and the specific game was identified by adding the sport’s name rather than designating a distinct ball type. Consequently, harpastum should be understood as a game rather than as a separate category of ball (Besker, 2011). The pila used in harpastum was hard and relatively small, slightly smaller than a modern football. At the beginning of a match, players from each team positioned themselves on their respective halves of the field. The primary objective of the game was to tackle the opponent in possession of the ball, seize it, and carry it into one’s own half to score points. This feature has led many scholars to compare harpastum to modern rugby-style games (Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025b).

2.4.1 Definition and Origins of Harpastum

Harpastum (from the Latin harpastum, meaning “*handball*”) was an ancient Roman team ball game derived from the Greek sport episkyros. The Romans adopted this Greek game, modified its rules, and renamed it harpastum, often referring to it colloquially as the “*small ball game*.” Like many elements of Roman physical culture, its origins lie firmly within the Greek world. Ancient Greek authors also refer to similar games using names such as epikoinos and ephebic, confirming that the Romans borrowed and adapted existing Greek traditions (Ebceehkob, 2024). The etymology of the term harpastum remains debated. Babylon.com’s Latin dictionary translates the term as “*rugby*,” reflecting modern interpretive parallels. Some scholars suggest that the word derives

from *harpago*, meaning “*a tool for holding iron with the fingers*,” while others argue for an origin in the Greek verb *harpazein*, meaning “*to seize*” or “*to snatch*.” Although its precise linguistic origin remains uncertain, both interpretations align well with the physical nature of the game (Varnica, 2024). The game may represent the Roman version of either the Greek *phaininda* or *episkyros*. It was typically played by teams of five to twelve players using a small, hard ball on a rectangular field marked with boundary lines and divided by a central line. Each team attempted to keep the ball within its own half of the field while preventing the opposing team from capturing it and carrying it across the center line. Players were permitted to block opponents, but the use of the feet was minimal, emphasizing upper-body strength, agility, and tactical movement (Perz, 2015).

2.4.2 Development and Spread of Harpastum

The Romans further developed *episkyros* into *harpastum*, which became widely known as the “little ball game” due to the small size of the ball used. Roman sporting culture employed four general ball sizes, with the smallest reserved for *harpastum*. This ball, often filled with sand or hair, was approximately the size of a volleyball (Gardiner, 2012; Kennell, 1995; Lewis & Short, 2024). Due to limited archaeological and textual evidence, it is difficult to determine precisely when *harpastum* first emerged. However, scholars generally suggest that the game originated around the fifth century BC and remained popular for approximately 700–800 years. During the height of the Roman Empire, *harpastum* spread across Europe, carried by Roman armies as both a recreational activity and a form of military training. It is widely believed that the game reached regions such as Britain during Roman expansion, contributing to the later development of football-like traditions in these areas (Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025b). *Harpastum* was reportedly used to maintain the physical fitness of Roman legionaries, and historical accounts suggest that Julius Caesar himself played the game and promoted its use as part of military conditioning. As such, *harpastum* functioned not only as a recreational sport but also as a tool for preparing soldiers for the physical demands of warfare.

2.4.3 Playing Area and Equipment

Harpastum was played with a small but relatively heavy ball, sometimes described as similar to a *follis* or *paganica* filled with feathers. Matches took place on rectangular fields marked with clear boundary lines and divided by a central line. Teams typically consisted of five to twelve players, and some sources indicate that the field size was comparable to that of a modern hockey pitch. Roman authors emphasize that the *harpastum* ball was notably robust when compared to modern softballs (Ebceehkob, 2024).

2.4.5 Sources and Evidence

Several visual and material sources contribute to our understanding of *harpastum*. Roman mosaics from Ostia depict players engaged in intense physical interaction, dressed in tunics without armor, suggesting either competitive play or structured physical training in a gymnasium setting. Additional reliefs, including those housed in

major archaeological museums, illustrate ball juggling and skill demonstrations by Greek and Roman athletes. A Roman tombstone discovered at a military camp in Sinj, Croatia, depicts a boy holding a ball with hexagonal and pentagonal panels resembling a modern football, further reinforcing associations between harpastum and later ball sports (Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025b).

2.5 Antyllus and Ancient Ball Exercises

The most important passages concerning ancient ball games are generally presented in standard introductory works on ancient athletics. However, one particularly valuable account is attributed to Antyllus, a medical writer of the second century AD, whose writings survive mainly through later medical compilations. Antyllus discusses ball games within a broader framework of physical exercises, including running, horseback riding, hoop rolling, swimming, wrestling, and shadow boxing (Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025b). According to Antyllus, ball exercises improve agility and strengthen overall vitality. He distinguishes different forms of exercise based on ball size, including small balls, large balls, medium-sized balls, well-balanced balls, and hollow balls. Among these, he identifies three types of small balls, each associated with a distinct exercise effect. The smallest ball was considered especially beneficial for strengthening the legs. A slightly larger small ball was regarded as ideal for maintaining general health, enhancing agility, and sharpening vision without causing heaviness in the head. A third, larger small ball was played at a distance and could be used in either stationary or moving forms. In the stationary version, players stood in place and threw the ball forcefully, strengthening their arms and eyes. In the mobile version, players ran while throwing and catching, which similarly trained the arms and eyes but also benefited the spine due to rotational movements and frequent turns (Koca and İmamoğlu, 2025).

2.6 Harpastum

2.6.1 Violence, Physicality, and Literary Testimony

Ancient literary accounts frequently emphasize the intensity and danger associated with harpastum. Roman boys playing ball in the streets are mentioned in several sources, and Cicero recounts a case in which a man was killed by a blow to the groin from a ball—possibly the earliest historically documented death associated with a ball game. Athenaeus describes harpastum, also known as phaininda, as a physically exhausting activity involving violent movements and severe bodily strain, famously stating that the game involved “*ruthless twisting and breaking of necks.*” Antiphon similarly complained of neck pain caused by the game. Athenaeus provides a vivid description of play, emphasizing constant motion, rapid passing, deception, physical collisions, and the presence of loud crowds surrounding the players (Ebceehkob, 2024).

Sources consistently indicate that harpastum developed into a violent and physically demanding sport, with frequent falls and injuries. Descriptions provided by ancient writers closely resemble modern rugby-style play, including references to lines

drawn on the ground and efforts by teams to keep the ball behind their own lines while preventing opponents from seizing it (Ermiş *et al.*, 2023).

2.6.2 Harpastum and the Origins of European Ball Games

Harpastum is sometimes described as a direct precursor of European football. During Roman expansion, the game was likely introduced to regions such as the British Isles, where simpler ball games already existed among Celtic populations. Historical accounts suggest that matches occurred between Roman soldiers and local Britons, with one notable reference to a Roman defeat in AD 217. Despite this cultural contact, harpastum eventually disappeared in Britain, and it is unlikely that it directly influenced the development of English football. Nevertheless, scholars acknowledge that Roman harpastum may represent an early stage in the broader evolution of European ball games (Ebceehkob, 2024).

2.6.3 Ball Types and Comparative Archaeological Evidence

Archaeological evidence from Egypt indicates that ball games were widespread across ancient civilizations. Egyptian balls were made from various materials, including wood, leather, and papyrus, and were generally smaller than harpastum balls, resembling gymnastic balls. The oldest surviving football-like ball dates from 1540–1570 and was discovered in the residence of Queen Mary I of Scotland; it was made from an animal bladder (Ebceehkob, 2024).

2.6.4 Rules and Reconstructions of Harpastum

Reconstructed rules attributed to the Roman legion Legio X Fretensis suggest that the game was played without armor to reduce injuries. Play began with the ball tossed into the air from the center of the field. Physical contact was permitted only against players in possession of the ball. Passing was allowed, and goals were scored by placing—not throwing—the ball into the opponent’s goal area. Dropping the ball did not count as a score, and collapsed player piles were broken up after a set time (Ebceehkob, 2024). The Greek predecessor episkyros was played by teams of approximately 12–14 players on a field marked by central and rear boundary lines. Handling the ball was permitted, and the objective was to pass the ball beyond the opponent’s back line (Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025b).

Physical Demands and Motor Skills: Harpastum required a combination of speed, agility, endurance, and physical strength. Like modern rugby, it was extremely rough, with injuries frequently reported. Historical speculation suggests that Julius Caesar himself played the game to maintain physical fitness, and Roman soldiers used it as preparation for warfare (Tucci, 2022).

2.6.5 Gameplay Structure and Tactical Roles

Harpastum consisted of two teams, usually numbering around a dozen players each, playing on a rectangular field slightly smaller than a modern football pitch. Baselines

marked the scoring zones. Players could pass, volley, or carry the ball, while opponents attempted to regain possession through physical engagement. The precise scoring system remains unclear, as does the duration of matches. Ancient texts frequently mention a singular *mediocritas* (“*middle player*”), whose role appears to have involved constant movement between offense and defense. This player may have functioned similarly to a modern midfielder, rapidly switching sides as possession changed. Sidonius Apollinaris recounts that participants abandoned games due to sheer exhaustion from continuous running.

2.6.6 Harpastum as Private Entertainment

Unlike gladiatorial games, harpastum was not a mass spectator sport. Literary evidence suggests it was played primarily as private entertainment among friends, soldiers, or colleagues, often in baths or military camps. Galen of Pergamon strongly recommended harpastum for soldiers, praising its efficiency in training the entire body within a short time and at no cost. This private nature helps explain the scarcity of material evidence compared to large public spectacles.

2.6.7 Ball Construction and Playing Conditions

The harpastum ball was relatively small—approximately 20 cm in diameter—and stuffed with sponges, hair, or animal fur inside stitched leather. The game was played on grass or soil surfaces due to the physical contact involved. Some sources even suggest exceptionally large-scale matches involving hundreds of players, though these accounts remain speculative.

2.6.8 Variants of Play

Ancient sources describe at least two versions of harpastum. One version allowed both hand-passing and kicking, beginning outside the baseline. Another focused on maintaining possession within one’s own half, forbidding the ball from touching the ground. This second version was particularly brutal, involving wrestling holds, takedowns, and frequent injuries. Despite its violence, Galen regarded the game as an excellent form of physical exercise (Harris, 1972; Yamaner and İmamoğlu, 2024).

2.6.9 Harpastum, Rugby, and American Football

Modern scholars often compare harpastum to rugby and, to a lesser extent, American football. Common features include restricted blocking, possession-based tactics, physical engagement, and minimal use of the feet. While some modern sources describe harpastum as a “*barbaric form of rugby*,” ancient descriptions suggest a more structured and tactical game emphasizing deception, passing combinations, and positional roles (Ebceehkob, 2024; Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025b).

3. Conclusion

In ancient Rome, three primary ball sizes were used: pila, follis, and paganica. Ball games played a significant role in daily Roman life, particularly in baths and gymnasiums. Although literary and archaeological sources are limited, available evidence confirms that ball play was a common and valued activity. Harpastum, in particular, stands out for its intense physicality and tactical complexity. Unlike modern football, it was far more violent, with documented injuries and fatalities. Played on a field divided by lines, the game required strength, speed, and endurance, making it more comparable to rugby than to association football. Despite uncertainties regarding its precise rules, harpastum represents one of the most physically demanding and influential ball games of antiquity, offering valuable insight into Roman attitudes toward sport, fitness, and competition.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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