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## WHOSE GAME IS IT ANYWAY? BOARD AND DICE GAMES AS AN EXAMPLE OF CULTURAL TRANSFER AND HYBRIDITY

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### ABSTRACT

Board games in antiquity are characterized by their continuity in both shape and playing practice when crossing socio-political borders and centuries of time. But as much as these games appear similar throughout the archaeological record, traces of integration and appropriation are found in aspects not necessarily affecting rules of play or configurations of boards. Recently uncovered examples of the game of *Duodecim scripta* in Egypt and Sudan point to changes in board design or, at least, in design preference when compared to those found else-

where in the Roman Empire. The presence of game boards in grave contexts further illustrates the extent of the appropriation that may have taken place. Egypt and Sudan in Greco-Roman times are on and across the border of the Roman world and provide ideal contexts for the understanding of the cultural appropriation process of board games in antiquity.

### KEYWORDS

Acculturation,  
*Alea*,  
boardgame,  
chess,  
diffusionism,  
*Duodecim scripta*,  
Egypt,  
Europe,  
*game of fifty-eight holes*,  
*game of twenty*,  
*Hnefatafl*,  
*Ludus latruncularum*,  
Sudan.

Les jeux de plateau dans l'Antiquité se caractérisent par leur continuité au niveau de la morphologie et des pratiques ludiques à travers les frontières socio-politiques et les siècles. Cependant, bien que ces jeux puissent paraître similaires sur le plan archéologique, des éléments d'intégration et d'appropriation se manifestent dans des aspects qui n'influencent pas nécessairement les règles ou la structure du plateau. Des exemples du jeu de *Duodecim scripta* découverts récemment en Égypte et au Soudan témoignent de changements dans la structure du plateau, ou du moins dans le choix du type par comparaison avec d'autres exemples mis au jour dans le reste de l'empire romain. La présence de plateaux de jeu en contexte funéraire illustre aussi l'étendue du processus d'appropriation qui s'est effectué. L'Égypte et le Soudan à l'époque gréco-romaine se situent aux limites et au-delà des frontières du monde romain, ce qui fournit des contextes exemplaires pour la compréhension des processus d'appropriation culturelle des jeux de plateau dans l'Antiquité.

### MOTS-CLÉS

Acculturation,  
*Alea*,  
diffusionnisme,  
*Duodecim scripta*,  
échecs,  
Égypte,  
*jeu de plateau*,  
*jeu de 58 trous*,  
*jeu de 20 cases*,  
*Ludus latruncularum*,  
Soudan.

Article accepté après évaluation par deux experts selon le principe du double anonymat

## INTRODUCTION: LAYING OUT THE FIELD OF PLAY

*Veni, vidi, ludique*, the title of the conference that took place in Switzerland in 2014 is a play on the well-known phrase which, according to Appian, Plutarch and Suetonius, was first used in the form: *Veni, vidi, vici*, “I came, I saw, I conquered”, by Julius Caesar, after a speedy victory over the Pontians. It has remained a mobile phrase over subsequent centuries, usually with an adaptation of the final element, in military, political and cultural contexts, including music, film and novels. It has enjoyed something of a renaissance in the late 20th-early 21st centuries, examples including the 1984 film *Ghostbusters*, in which pseudo-scientist Peter Venkman proclaims, after busting a ghost: “We came, we saw, we kicked its ass”; in 2011, Hilary Clinton said, welcoming the news of Colonel Gaddafi’s death in Libya: “We came, we saw, he died”, and during the 2015 Tour de France cycle race, the roadside fan-banners included “Veni, Vidi, Vincenzo Nibali”. These playful re-workings of the original “I came, I saw, I conquered” reflect how cultural exchange and transfer can happen through games (in this case word-games) and playfulness.

This article takes a wider view of Greco-Roman board games in order to foreground a deeper, cross-contextual and cross-cultural theme, concerning the transfer of board games from one culture to another. It explores this territory through three linked, brief assessments. Firstly I look at board games as play, then I consider the link to diffusionism and acculturation and thirdly I explore three case studies to tie things together. It takes as axiomatic that it is the playfulness of board games that gives them their essential quality of ‘social lubrication’ [1], and I suggest that this network-maintaining agency, formerly simplistically labelled as diffusionism, is key to understanding their spread and hybridisation. The demonstration of these ideas and concepts in

action is offered through three case studies, from the ancient Near East and Egypt, from Roman-Iron Age Europe and from medieval Europe and Asia. The first explores the spread of the board games 20 squares and 58 holes, the second the metamorphosis of the Roman board game *Ludus latrunculorum* into the North European *hnefatafl* group and the third looks at a particular aspect of the spread of chess and the Medieval desire to give it a Classical origin.

## PLAY

A recent conceptualising of play by Miguel Sicart is a useful reminder, *contra* Johan Huizinga, that play is to be and to act in the world [2]. It facilitates understanding of our social surrounding, of our identity and allows interacting with others. Play is an extensive field of human activities. We play games, we play with toys, with technologies and design, physically and virtually with each other and on playgrounds. Like other forms of activities it can be dangerous, hurting, damaging, antisocial and corrupting. Play is a manifestation of humanity, a form of self- and community-expression, an agency for being in the world and building that world [3]. Play does not inherently stand outside of life (or rather culture), as J. Huizinga suggested, but is a behavioural complex that enables people to negotiate the complex interrelations that form the daily life of a community. As Friedrich Nietzsche long ago observed, play is a movement between order and chaos, an entanglement central to the analysis of play by Mihai Spariosu [4]. Games are a particular manifestation of play, but they are part of a wider, richly contextual, ecology of play. The ally of play is playfulness. Play is the action or performance, playfulness is a psychological, physical and emotional attitude. It can colour not only our play but also our approach to the rest of life. Miguel Sicart defines it as “the carnivalesque domain of the appropriation, the triumph [...] of the disruptive

[1] A term from CRIST & DE VOGT & DUNN-VATURI 2016a.

[2] SICART 2014; HUIZINGA 1955

[3] GOODMAN 1978.

[4] NIETZSCHE 1872; HINMAN 1974; SPARIOSU 1989.

irony over rules and commands" [5]. Both play and playfulness share the characteristic of ambiguity. This ambiguity of play is described by M. Spariosu as *amphibolous*, meaning opaque and containing its opposite [6]. It is a key concept in its understanding. This lies with board games in the paradox of freedom (the escape play gives) and containment (the set of rules). Communication barriers that might otherwise block social/cultural interaction or entanglement, including during times of war, are often by-passed by games. War clearly does not deter the spread of games, not least because war and play are so readily linked through *agôn*, competition. To cite but one contemporary example, former US military intelligence sergeant, Kayla Williams, observed of local-US interaction during the Iraq War: "The Kurdish locals also played a game we called 'rock', though this was certainly not its real name. It was a little like checkers. They would draw a grid on the ground and have sides with light rocks or dark rocks. Despite the immense language barrier, the Pathfinders learned to communicate. They learned how to play rock, for instance. Some of the Pathfinders got pretty good at it too, and would win once in a while against the Peshmergas" [7]. This episode resonates strongly with the mixture of Roman and North African board games found at the Roman fort of Abu'Shar on the Red Sea Coast of Egypt [8].

## AGENCY, MEMES AND NETWORKS

In his 1940 account of the Nuer people of Sudan and Ethiopia, anthropologist Edward E. Evans-Pritchard made the following observation:

"Material objects are chains along which social relationships run [...], people not only create their material culture and attach themselves to it, but also build up their relationships through it and see them in terms of it" [9].

I contrast this acute, inspiring analysis, which understands the entangled relationship between people and material culture, with a conjoined quote by Roland Austin:

"The study of Greek games is, in fact, a journey into complete darkness [...]. Investigators have not hesitated to equate Greek games with Roman or both with

those of Egypt and the Orient if occasion suited, and to lay down rules for the one deduced entirely for the other. Actually the most sober caution is necessary. We are not justified in deriving the games of one country from those of another [...]" [10].

The nuanced observation by Moses Finley in his 1952 *The World of Odysseus* also helps us to see a context in which board games acted as a non-economic form of exchange:

"[...] Trade differed from the various forms of gift exchange in that the exchange of goods was the end in itself. In trade things changed hands because each needed what the other had [...], not [...] to compensate for a service, seal an alliance or support a friendship" [11].

Each of these quotes, amongst which there is an undoubted tension, contribute to an understanding of human interaction and its complexity. Such interaction is at the heart of how board games move about. Recovering that full complexity of interaction is impossible, but I remain more optimistic than Austin, for example, by following some old trails across the playground not bounded by political and geographic determinism. In essence my argument is that the Silk Road or any other highway of trade and exchange is essentially a playground upon which people held such discourse.

## SPREADING THE FUN AROUND: DIFFUSIONISM AND ACCULTURATION

Diffusionism is one of the mechanisms of human interaction and a key facet of the enduring debate about the spread of board games. It is implicit in the origin stories told by historians since Classical Greece [12]. In games scholarship since the 17<sup>th</sup> century down to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century [13], a simple, straightforward notion of diffusion held sway, requiring a point of origin from which ideas moved outward in a linear fashion. This tradition recognised a cultural hierarchy in which the best (the Greeks and the Romans) were creative, and copied by inferior cultures. According to that approach, "inferior", that is "native" cultures, can never be seen as alternate centres of diffusion, just as receivers and corruptors of the ideas of others. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century

[5] SICART 2014: 3-4. See also SUITS 2005.

[6] SPARIOSU 1989; SUTTON-SMITH 2001.

[7] WILLIAMS 2006: 157.

[8] MULVIN & SIDEBOTHAM 2004. See also A. De Voogt in this volume.

[9] EVANS-PRITCHARD 1940: 89.

[10] AUSTIN 1940: 260 and 1934: 24.

[11] FINLEY 1952: 63.

[12] See e.g. HERODOTUS 1, 94, attributing the invention of games to the Lydians.

[13] See e.g. BARRINGTON 1787; TAYLOR 1879 and 1880.

Harold J. R. Murray contributed significantly to the history of board game scholarship by introducing a much more nuanced picture of board game diffusion, in which he articulated several centres of diffusion for contrasting board games. He recognised it as a complicated process, where:

“the original stage may be to any neighbouring people with whom there is contact for exchange of goods or ideas, and these people may modify and improve the game and become a new centre from which the reformed game is diffused and this diffusion may carry this reformed game back to its original home [...] or a game may reach a country from two different directions [...]” [14].

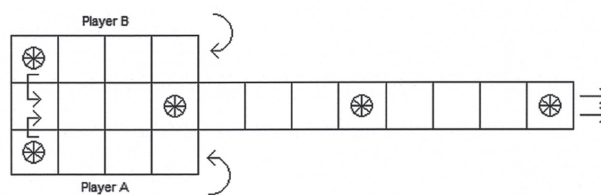
H. J. R. Murray published his book in 1951 after decades of collecting data and examples; ironically just at the time when diffusion was losing credibility as an academic idea. It began to re-gain some wider credibility in the last three decades, with much more nuance and complexity, defined variously as cultural transmission or acculturation, entanglement and meme theory. Acculturation is concerned with the non-biologically transferred elements of culture, learned through experience and participation by which people create, remember and deal with ideas. Yuval Harari’s recent analysis of hominid evolution suggests that the turning point, when humans step from within the parameters of biological evolution was the so-called *Cognitive Revolution* that took place some 70,000 years ago, when seemingly something happened in the human brain that allowed hominids to create fictions about themselves and the universe [15]. This propensity for fiction includes play, and we might say that once animal play behaviours evolved into something more sophisticated, fiction and the variety of games exponentially increased. Cultural evolution and play are closely inter-linked. The *Cognitive Revolution* eventually precipitated the *Agricultural Revolution*, the settled behaviour of which appears to have been crucial to the invention of board games.

Entanglement is a developing area of cultural theory, which takes its impetus from quantum entanglement [16]. Culturally it is used to label the exploration of social interactions between people and things and their non-linear, chaotic complexity. A meme is an idea or a mode of behaviour that spreads from person to

person within and beyond a culture. It is a unit that carries a cultural idea, symbol or practice, the transmission of which is accomplished through speech, writing, gestures, rituals, play or other imitable phenomena. The memes spread through the behaviour that they generate in their hosts. It is now a widely practiced area of research and is highly contested, particularly as empirical science [17]. For our purposes the key insight from the development of meme theory is that whilst mechanisms of entanglement - trade, exchange, religious and magical rites, warfare, conquest and slavery included - remain important as opportunities for interaction, they are not in themselves an explanation for why board games spread. An application of the meme theory in its evolutionary analogy with gene theory is that the board games idea or ideas, have an inherent, self-promoting appeal. That appeal is routed in play, which we might regard as a “super-meme”. This can have the effect of undermining the importance of social context but equally reminds us of the persistence of the nature vs. nurture debate. We do not have to pick one of these - the reality is surely an ever-changing combination of nature and nurture, which leads to cultural hybridity and in which memes act as agents of social discourse or kinds of inter-cultural ambassadors.

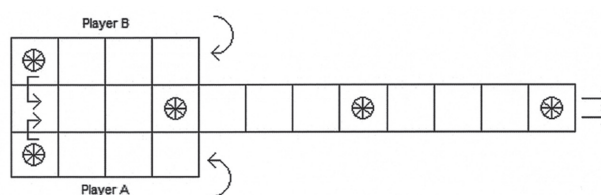
## TWENTY SQUARES AND FIFTY-EIGHT HOLES (fig.1a and 1b)

A first case study concerns two widespread games from the ancient Near East, played from Egypt to Turkey to Iraq and across two millennia. We know



▲ Figure 1 a. Line drawing to show the layout of the games 20 squares. Courtesy and © Ulrich Schädler, Musée Suisse du Jeu, La Tour-de-Peilz, Switzerland.

▼ Figure 1 b. Line drawing to show the layout of the games 58 holes. After HJR Murray, *A History of Board Games other than Chess*, Oxford 1952, p. 15 fig. 3.

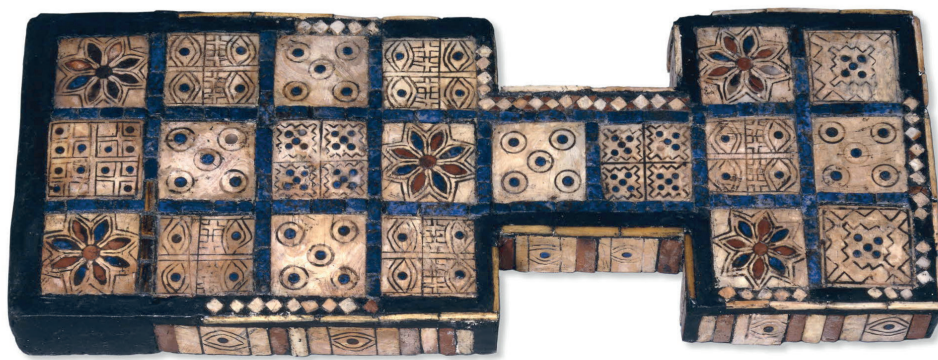


[14] MURRAY 1951: 228.

[15] HARARI 2014.

[16] BARAD 2007.

[17] See e.g. THOMAS 1991 and HODDER 2012. The term “meme” was coined in DAWKINS 1976.



◀ Figure 2. Wooden game board with 20 squares of inlaid shell recovered from a royal female burial at Ur, Iraq, dating to 2600-2400 BCE. Courtesy and © the British Museum, 120834.



▼ Figure 3. An example of a ceramic game-board for 58 holes/hounds and jackals/the palm tree

them as twenty squares and fifty-eight holes (the *game of twenty* and the *game of fifty-eight*), recently compellingly analysed by Alex de Voogt, Anne-Elizabeth Dunn-Vaturi and Jelmer Eerkens [18]. The *game of twenty* is probably the beginning of the family of games we play today as backgammon, in which two players race seven pieces each around a board, the moves controlled by rolling four dice. The *game of fifty-eight*, part of the same family of games, involved two players who race to move their pieces (animal-headed stick pins) around a course of 29 holes each. The most well-known example of the *game of twenty* (fig. 2) is that from Ur, giving us the alternate name of the *Royal Game of Ur*. This probably originated in Mesopotamia. The *game of fifty-eight* (fig. 3) (also known as *hounds and jackals*) may also have originated in Mesopotamia or possibly in Egypt. Both games spread well beyond their home territories into conquered and neighbouring lands, through trade and exchange and alongside warfare. The recent study focussed on the transmission aspects of the games, seeking to account both for their initial spread and their subsequent, continuing appeal. The key evidence deployed is the gaming materials themselves and their apparent wide geographic and long chronological stability.

With respect to the Ur version of the *game of twenty* we are also lucky to have rules recorded on cuneiform tablets [19]. The rules for the *game of fifty-eight* remain more or less opaque. To this admittedly partial



evidence base the authors applied cultural transmission theory. Backed by statistical analysis they devised models to describe the passing of information (board games) between individuals and the cumulative effects of these processes across space and time. This includes within and across generations and between individuals and groups and also takes cognizance of copying strategies, including aping, that sought to replicate, reproduce and make fun of social elites' practices. They found that the mapping of the evidence of the two games did not necessarily follow the model predictions. To sum up their conclusion: both games appear to demonstrate that expansive areas and long periods

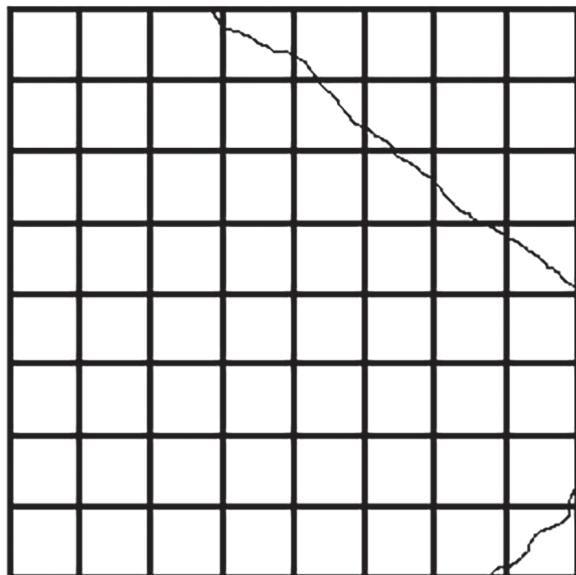
[18] DE VOOGT & DUNN-VATURI & EERKENS 2013; see also Anne-Elizabeth Dunn-Vaturi this volume, for the evidence for a non-Egyptian origin.

[19] FINKEL 2007

of time do not necessarily change the physical appearance of the game board. The games were transmitted with high fidelity and minor innovations. They show different histories in terms of trade and conquest that help explain their distribution. Contrary to the theoretical modelling the complexity of the *game of fifty-eight* did not prevent it being either transmitted through trade or being innovated to produce new variants. Crossing socio-cultural boundaries has positive effects on rates of innovation, likely as people reinterpret rules or other parts of the game from their own local and cultural perspectives. In terms of future analysis they observe that:

“while the classical archaeological record documents the long term presence of game boards across wide geographical areas, contemporary cultural anthropological research may add specifics in terms of playing rules and playing context that could add to the details required for a better understanding of cultural transmission [...] of board games [...]The attention paid to this domain from the anthropological disciplines such as classical archaeology and cultural anthropology, has room for improvement” [20].

Subsequently Walter Crist, Alex de Voogt and Anne-Elizabeth Dunn-Vaturi have developed these ideas further in the context of studying the board games of ancient Egypt, applying the concept of ‘social lubrication’, which has hitherto focussed on the study of intoxicants and psychoactive substances, to that of games [21].



[20] DE VOOGT & DUNN-VATURI & EERKENS 2013: 1728.

[21] CRIST & DE VOOGT & DUNN-VATURI 2016a and 2016b.

[22] TURNER 1982: 27.

[23] CRIST & DE VOOGT & DUNN-VATURI 2016b: 169.

Critically, they follow Victor Turner’s interpretation of games [22] as having a liminal nature, another aspect of their ambiguity which facilitates the circumvention of socially constructed boundaries and which they analogise with use of social lubricants, both sharing common factors of use or performance in specific places at specific times and with diverse outcomes on inter-personal relationships [23]. They use archaeological and textual evidence seen through an anthropological lens to track the movements and changes in board games in and out of Egypt over several millennia. They are linked to diverse social contexts within Egypt (including the pursuits of elites) and to the changing external political, military and trading connections. These fluctuating networks were oiled by boundary-crossing board games, in the Greco-Roman and medieval and modern worlds as much as in the ancient one.

### FROM LUDUS LATRUNCULORUM TO HNEFATAFL (fig. 4a and 4b)

The second case study moves forward in time to the first half of the first millennium CE to explore the transfer and appropriation of the Roman game *Ludus latrunculorum* or *latrunculi* (fig. 4a) to the Germanic, Scandinavian, Irish and British Celtic games *tafl*, *hnefatafl*, *fidcheall* and *gwyddbwyll* (fig. 4b). In the last 20

◀ Figure 4 a. Line drawing to show the layout of the Roman game *ludus latrunculorum*, based on the incomplete board preserved on the steps of the Basilica Iulia, Rome.

▼ Figure 4b. Line drawing to show the layout of the North European game *tafl* (specifically *hnefatafl*). Courtesy and © Sandra Jaeggi, University of Fribourg, Switzerland.

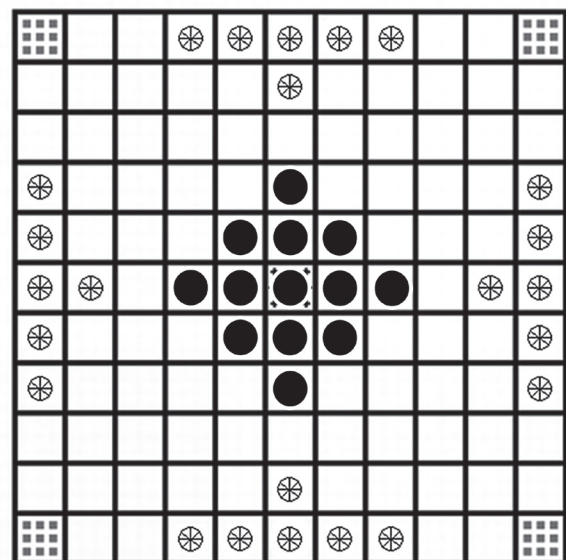




Figure 5.  
The gaming board and pieces as found in the Doctor's Grave, Stanway, Essex, England. © Colchester Archaeology Trust. Courtesy Philip Crummy.

years the archaeological evidence for Roman-derived board games on the Empire's European frontiers has increased massively and added significant weight to the idea that board games appear to have been a Roman introduction to the North European "Barbaricum".

Several scholars have contributed nuanced arguments exploring this scenario in Germany, in Scandinavia and in Britain and Ireland, particularly with respect to *latrunculi*, less so for the *Duodecim scripta/tables* transition and the spread of *merels*, which need a similar re-assessment. Without disparaging any of that work, it is worth noting that the idea was mooted as long ago as the 1940s by H. J. R. Murray [24]. In his diffusion ideas he concisely outlined the Roman-Germanic board-game transition under the heading of one of his diffusion centres, Rome [25]. The Germanic and Scandinavian contexts of this transmission have been well documented and analysed in the last decade and a half, with less attention on the transmission in France and the Low Countries [26]. Space does not allow me to discuss that material here in detail and suffice to say that the process of dissemination was not one of wholesale borrowing or slavish imitation, but rather a creative indigenous response to stimulus in which games were adapted to local cultural and social contexts. The most recent analysis of *tafl* in Scandinavia suggests that it was derived from Roman imports or gifts of *Ludus latruncolorum* [27]. The Scandinavian variant *hnefatafl* retained *Ludus latruncolorum*'s flanking-capture play (fig. 4 a, b), but substituted a king and his defending warriors attacked by a larger force

for the two equally matched armies of the original. This innovation may have been made desirable by the changed social context, perhaps resonating better with the institution of the *comitatus*. My own work in this area, with Katherine Forsyth, has sought to explore the context of this transition in Britain and Ireland, widening a trail forged by Ulrich Schädler and Philip Crummy in their work on the so-called Doctor's Grave, from Stanway, Essex, SE England [28]. We looked at four key sites, Stanway, Knowth (Ireland) Tarland, and Scalloway (both Scotland), through which we postulated a time-deep development of board games as an innovation of Roman custom and material culture, part of wider cultural package that notably included literacy: we noted that the Norse runic and Irish ogham alphabets are both scripts developed beyond the *limes* under the influence of Latin literacy, clearly based on the Latin alphabet yet visually very different from their Roman model [29].

The Stanway grave is dated to 40–50 CE. Its grave goods include the remains of a wooden gaming board (of which only the metal hinges survived) laid out as if for play, with 26 glass counters. What survived

[24] MURRAY 1940.

[25] MURRAY 1952: 230.

[26] But see the recent study by DILIBARTO & LEJARS 2013 for an analysis of transmission north of the Alps.

[27] SOLBERG 2007; WHITTAKER 2006.

[28] CRUMMY 2007; SCHÄDLER 2007.

[29] HALL & FORSYTH 2011: 1326.



enabled the size and possible format of the board to be reconstructed, as a probable double-sided board. Both Ph. Crummy and U. Schädler concluded that, on balance, the board game from the Doctor's Grave was an unknown Celtic one [30] (fig. 5). A comparable and more recent discovery comes from Kent (site D on the Pepperhill to Cobham road-scheme) where grave 6260 was found to include amongst its grave goods elements of a folded gaming board similar to the Stanway examples, along with 23 glass gaming pieces (11 white and 12 black/blue) and two dice [31].

Roughly contemporary with the Doctor's Grave from Stanway is the twins-burial from Knowth Co. Meath. It has additional complexity both in the doubling up of the individuals buried and the doubling up of the games buried: accompanying a burial of decapitated male twins were 13 bone, pegged pieces, 21 stone pieces and three bone dice (fig. 6) [32]. The pieces were scattered as if on a board but no trace of such survived. Perhaps each group of pieces represents a separate set owned by each of the incumbents or perhaps the pieces were part of a single unity – a double-sided board for playing two different games, possibly *Duodecim scripta* and *Ludus latrunculi*, or derivatives of them. The dice may have been used in conjunction with the counters or in a third game of their own. The presence of three dice is suggestive of *Duodecim scripta* / *Alea*

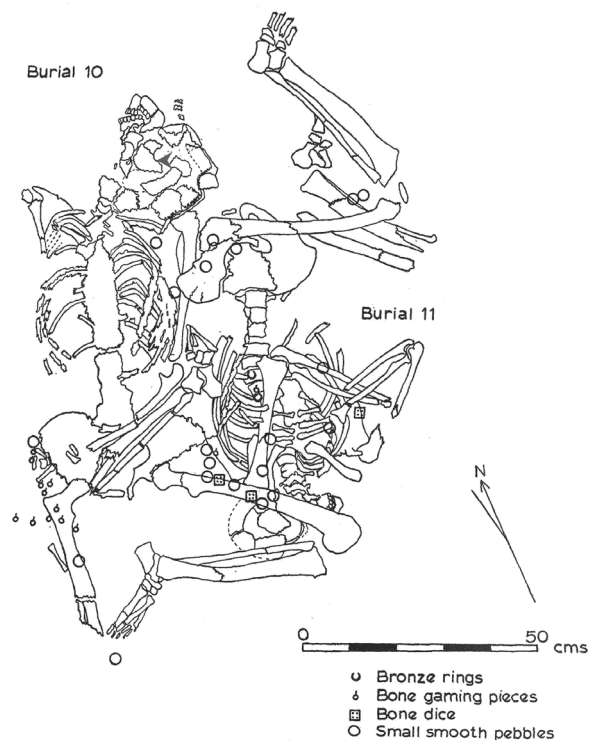
or a derivative. *Duodecim scripta*, using two dice, is conventionally the name given to the early imperial version of the game, whilst *Alea*, using three dice, applies to the Late Antique version. The fourth-century find from Qustul included five dice [33], but full clarity of that game requires an extant board layout, which we do not have. Strikingly the Knowth burial's set of 13 pegged-pieces matches the 13 pieces per side in the Stanway burial. Could the Knowth board have been a double-sided one, inspired by a Roman *Duodecim scripta* / *latrunculi* double-board? If it were a double-board then the pegged pieces were perhaps one

[30] HALL & FORSYTH 2011: 1328. PARLETT 1999, ix opted for a *latrunculi* identification.

[31] ALLEN *et al.* 2012: 351-353.

[32] HALL & FORSYTH 2011: 1328-1330; EOGAN & WEEKES 2012: 23-26.

[33] SCHÄDLER 1995 and 1998: 17.



▲ Figure 6. The so-called Gambler's Burial, Knowth, Co. Meath, Ireland, with two types of gaming piece and dice. © Royal Irish Academy.

◀ Figure 7. The range of playing pieces from Waulkmill, Tarland, Aberdeenshire. Photography by Mark Hall and courtesy of National Museums Scotland.

side in a set for a *latrunculi*-type game, and the counters and dice for playing something akin to *Duodecim scripta*? In interpreting gaming sets recovered from funerary contexts it should, however, be borne in mind that what was deposited was sometimes a representation of gaming, and that this need not be a complete set for play. In any case, as has been observed by U. Schädler [34], our modern notion of complete sets may be somewhat anachronistic in an age before the commercial marketing of board games.

Turning to the far north of Britain, there are two key pieces of evidence to consider. The first is the set of Romano-British glass gaming pieces from a second- to third-century grave at Tarland, Aberdeenshire, which signals a clear mixture of indigenous and Roman in a high status, non-Roman burial context (fig. 7). In 2012 excavations took place at Tarland and the results included an unexpected second group of likely gaming counters (which may also have had an amuletic function) that affirm the site's importance in demonstrating the entanglement of indigenous and Roman [35]. Part of the extensive mid-first millennium CE gaming assemblage from the broch site at Scalloway, Shetland includes a cone piece with a face, paralleled by a further example from the broch of Mail (fig. 8). These archaeological discoveries are important evidence in demonstrating the later development of the British and Irish variants of *latrunculi*, *gwyddbýll* and *fidcheall*, and probably equivalent to Scandinavian *hnefatafl*.

The evidence recovered from the burials at Knowth and Stanway suggest a scenario in which board games reached Britain at the end of the first century BCE, most likely from recently conquered Gaul. Gaming was then adopted by the elites of southern Britain as part of a package of continental and Roman culture, which also included wine-drinking, coinage, literacy and burial with grave goods [36]. As well as from their immediate neighbours in Gaul and Roman diplomatic missions, this taste for board-gaming was probably also acquired through the home-returning kings' sons and other British *obsides*, 'hostages', sent to Rome for education in Roman ways during this pre-Claudian conquest period [37]. The games played in southern



Figure 8.  
Anthropomorphic conical playing pieces from Mail (left) and Scalloway (right). Courtesy and © National Museums Scotland.

Britain may have been fully Roman ones, or local versions. Following the Roman conquest of the region in the mid-first century CE, the playing of Roman and Roman-style games became increasingly widespread, extending well beyond the imperial frontier at an early date. The gaming pieces from Tarland attest to their popularity among the Caledonian elite [38]. It remains uncertain whether board-gaming reached Ireland from Britain or via independent contacts with Roman power but Knowth demonstrates that it did so early, possibly even before the Roman conquest of Britain, and as part of a broader cultural package. We have no real clue as to whether board-games would have been perceived as Roman or British, quite possibly both depending on the particular nature of the contacts involved.

### CHESSE AND THE SIEGE OF TROY (fig. 9)

Chess can be regarded as the board game 'par excellence'. In terms of cultural transmission and entanglement, chess illustrates most of the mechanisms of cultural transfer and adaptation, including via the Silk Roads of land and sea transecting Eurasia and its waters, via high levels of gift exchange, via military conquest (be it in Islamic Spain or Crusader Holy Land), and via religious sermonising. Some of these mechanisms and influences I have explored in a paper addressing play across the town and country 'divide', including the social entanglement of chess [39]. Chess pieces were re-used as other objects (including as brooches, amulets and a whistle), which allowed chess to function as a wider lubricant within imaginative

[34] SCHÄDLER 2007: 368. See also the articles in this volume of Yves Manniez and Anne Widura for their contribution for archaeological finds in funerary contexts.

[35] HALL 2016b.

[36] HASELGROVE 1984; CREIGHTON 2000; see PURCELL 1995 for the link between gaming and literacy.

[37] See CREIGHTON 2000: 90-92.

[38] HALL 2007.

[39] HALL 2016a.

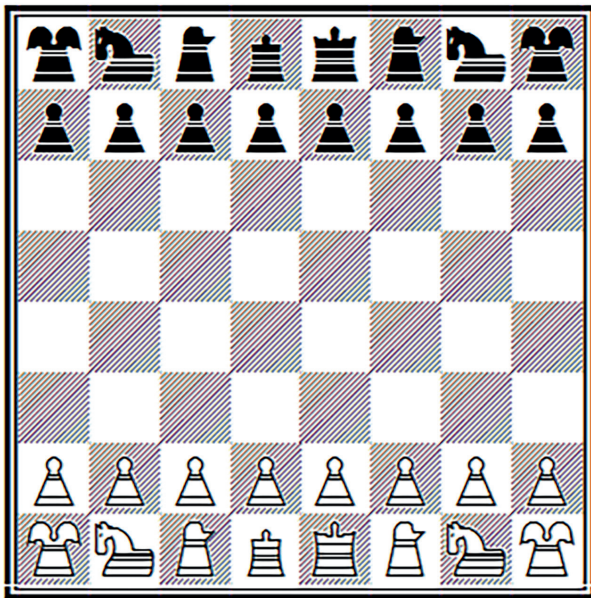


Figure 9.

Line drawing to show the layout of the medieval game of chess. Courtesy and © Ulrich Schädler, Musée Suisse du Jeu, La Tour-de-Peilz, Switzerland.

“It is unclear whether Samson and Hercules are presented as equals or whether pagan Hercules was understood as inferior to the more pious Samson” [42].

We should also note that the playful context meant that either Samson or Hercules could win through their respective players and be judged the superior.

In the medieval period chess forms a further element of the past brought into the present, with chess accorded an origin in that Greek-Roman past. The route through which this was achieved was the Trojan War. The board game element of the Trojan War myth seems fixed now but it was organic and changing. In Homer it is absent from *The Iliad* but is mentioned briefly in *The Odyssey* (1.106-12) [43], when the suitors of Penelope play a board game outside the house of Odysseus and it symbolises their status as bad aristocrats who consume another man’s household [44].

Figure 10.

Attic black-figured amphora of c.530 BCE, showing Achilles (left) playing *peSSI* with Ajax (right). Courtesy and © the British Museum, 1851.0806.15.



frameworks that crossed boundaries of language, religion, ethnicity, class and object function. Examples include the production of lead badges with chessboard designs in the Low Countries, which may be linked to the cults of saints whose stories include gaming episodes and/or to fantastic tales such as that of Walewein (Gawain) and the magical chessboard and the numerous depictions in art of figures playing chess with death, part of the widespread phenomenon of the *Danse Macabre* [40]. In this paper I will consider a different strand of this network of transferences and hybridity, one rooted in the human imagination and its inventive use of the past.

Across medieval Europe the past was defined as both Roman/Antique and Biblical/Christian in which context Glyn Davies and Kristin Kennedy observed that characters from these different pasts were sometimes brought together [41]. They cite the 12<sup>th</sup> century example of sets of tablemen depicting the Labours of Hercules alongside those of his Biblical equivalent, Samson, as opposing sides in the game:

[40] HALL 2016a: 204-207.

[41] DAVIES & KENNEDY 2009.

[42] DAVIES & KENNEDY 2009: 125.

[43] HOMER (RIEU 1948), where the unhelpful term “draughts” is used.

[44] KURKE 1999: 254-55; PURCELL 1995: 7.



Figure 11.  
One of the late 12<sup>th</sup>-early 13<sup>th</sup> century mosaics from Pesaro Cathedral. The whole mosaic is a conflation of the Trojan War and so the chess players are presumably Palamedes and Thermites/Ulysses. Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Pesaro. Photography by Danilo Conti and Giampero Cernuschi.

An association between the war itself and board games is in play by the mid first millennium BCE. An extensive range of archaic Attic vases depicts a popular scene showing the Greek heroes Ajax and Achilles playing what is probably *pente grammai*, the game of *five lines*, in an interlude in the fighting with the Trojans (fig.10) [45]. Similar scenes are found on the backs of some Etruscan mirrors. This narrates, presumably contemporary, military pastimes but also alludes to the fate of the men – both heroes died shortly after this interlude, Achilles through his flawed heel and Ajax by committing suicide. The meaning of this scene has been persuasively articulated as signifying in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE onwards civic appropriation of the Trojan War; the civic duty being signalled included dying in battle for the city or polis – “the heroes are played in the game of civic warfare just as they play on the board between them” [46]. Shortly after this time another gaming strand starts to be woven in, that of Palamedes [47]. He is falsely accused and executed for treason by the Greeks during the War. Part of his

unsuccessful defence is that he invented board and dice games (*pessoi* and *kuboi*). *Pessoi* essentially means gaming pieces and could refer to either *polis* or *pente grammai*, or perhaps a game that remains unknown to us. The earliest textual reference to Palamedes is possibly that by Stesichorus in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE [48]. His role is repeated and elaborated by several Classical writers, most of them reliant on the lost account of Greek Games by Suetonius. In this first iteration of the role of Palamedes through the mythopoiesis of Greek and Roman writers, the game introduced is dice or *Alea* (that is the game of tables that will later become backgammon) [49]. This was a game of war, linked to military tactics, contributing to the “relaxation of warriors” as it formed a compatible element of “attitudes to fighting that exalted the duel and its ideology” [50]. According to ancient writers, Palamedes, who also discovered numbers, tactics and the alphabet, thus “made human life passable where it had been pathless and gave order to what wholly lacked it” [51]. His inventions are another reflection of Greek civic duty:

[45] On the identification of the game as *pente grammai*, SCHÄDLER 2009.

[46] KURKE 1999: 272; see also CASTOLDI 2015 for interpretations of the scene’s metaphorical value. On the promotion of aristocratic value and association with Peisistratos, DASEN 2015.

[47] PURCELL 1995: 3, 11, 23, 25-26, 28-29, 31-34.

[48] PURCELL 1995: 31-32.

[49] This scholarship determined Isidore of Seville’s description: “dicing (*alea*), that is the game played at the gaming-board (*tabula*), was invented by the Greeks during lulls of

the Trojan War by a certain soldier named *Alea*, from whom the practice took its name”. (*Etymologies* XVIII, lx). The text is also available online at: <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/isidore/18.shtml>

[50] PURCELL 1995, 25. Cf. Sophocles, *Palamedes* 479 (ed. Radt) : “Was it not he who drove famine away from them, be it said with reverence towards the god, and he who discovered the cleverest ways of passing time for them when / they were resting after their struggle with the waves, draughts and dice, a pleasant remedy against idleness?” (transl. Lloyd-Jones).

[51] PURCELL 1995: 29.



Figure 12.

Harley 4431, f. 133, Miniature of Ulysses playing chess in his tent during the Trojan War (presumably against Palamedes), from *L'Épître Othéa* by Christine de Pisan (Paris, c.1410-c.1414). Courtesy and © the British Library.

(sometimes Ulysses). San Sorvino also includes dice players, a further reference to Palamedes's inventions. In *L'Épître Othéa* (c.1410-1414), Christine de Pisan re-tells the Trojan War and includes a miniature of Ulysses playing chess (presumably against Palamedes) in his campaign tent (**fig. 12**). There are then several strands to this re-imagining exercise. Chess was the game with which medieval folk – especially its elites, the self-appointed inheritors of the Greek culture hero status - were familiar and it was also the most acceptable of board games to the church. Linking it to the well-spring of Roman classical civilisation, its foundation myth gave such activity further authenticity. The notion of civic responsibility expressed through board games would surely have appealed to the urban elites of the Republican city-states of Northern Italy.

## CONCLUSION

“As military tactics, written laws, weights and measures, coinage and pessi progressively accrue to the Greek culture hero, the Plain of Troy comes to look more and more like a Greek city” [52].

A strong thread of medieval imaginative and political culture, particularly amidst urban elites was to link back to Rome as the eternal city and so to Troy, from which, according to Virgil's poem, legendary hero Aeneas fled to establish Rome. Medieval writers, copyists and illuminators maintained the tradition of Palamedes inventing board games during the Trojan War. In the medieval re-imagining this meant chess, also a game of war and tactics, as shown by the two 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century floor mosaics from the Italian churches of San Sovino, Piacenza and Pesaro Cathedral (**fig. 11**) [53], the immediate inspiration for which was probably the late 12<sup>th</sup> century *Roman de Troie* by Benoît de Sainte-Maure and perhaps *De Bello Troiano* by Joseph of Exeter. Their Trojan War cycles include Palamedes playing chess with Thermites

Thinking about play, in particular board games, in terms of mobility is problematic because of the nature of the evidence: generally gaming kit or equipment (boards, playing pieces and dice) survive, at least partially, but the rules rarely do. The majority of ancient texts that make mention of rules do so through allusion rather than direct reference. Occupying the middle ground between these two are various depictions of board and dice games in various media all conditioned by their social context and/or their symbolic value. A corollary to this is that the level at which we define something as a particular game affects how we can see it in motion. The game of chess for example is readily accepted as a game with a singular identity but behind the name are a myriad of variations. Chess, rather like its medieval counterpart *tables* (or *tric-trac* or *backgammon*) is a group of games with a shared identity. These identities come about through human interaction and in response to the aspirations and identities of their players. The fact that they seem superficially rigid because they require rules does not diminish the capacity of games to provide a space for exchange and communication, be it military, trade, gifts or emulation. On the move, sometimes board games changed and sometimes they stayed the same but they always carry with them stories of contact and entanglement. Purcell [54] in

[52] KURKE 1999: 272.

[53] For San Sovino see TRONZO 1977, for the Pesaro mosaics: [http://www.pesaromosaici.it/pesaro\\_mosaici/mosaici\\_pesaro\\_EN.html](http://www.pesaromosaici.it/pesaro_mosaici/mosaici_pesaro_EN.html)

[54] PURCELL 1995: 31.

his discussion of Palamedes concludes that *Alea* (and by analogy other games, including chess) was a cultural skill, a form of transferrable communication. Games then are essentially simple to play and so can travel across and between boundaries and their facility to do so means that they are fundamental to cultural hybridity, to being made relevant to each new context and to being “surrounded by intellectual paraphernalia” [55]. Medieval writers in their world of elite literary culture copied classical texts and were not afraid to make changes they deemed appropriate to the image they sought to cultivate, one that chess suited more than tables did. The name of the game changed but the powerful coupling of board-game play with literacy that helped to oil the dynamics within and across societies remained.

[55] PURCELL 1995: *ibid.*

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