

Mehen, God of the Boardgames / Benedikt Rothöhler

Ancient Egyptian boardgames normally have a religious symbolism, although it is often very difficult to find the exact meaning. One cannot examine the subject of Egyptian boardgames without taking into account this background. The question arises, whether there is a god of the boardgames in general. The snake-shaped god MEHEN⁽¹⁾ is assigned to boardgames in more than one way, and we will see that he indeed can be considered the god of the boardgames. The symbolism of Egyptian boardgames, especially *Mehen* and *Senet*, is directly connected with the functions of this deity. His exact role was however never fully investigated. As for Mehen (the boardgame), there are only two serious researches:

Herman Ranke, *Das altägyptische Schlangenspiel*, Heidelberg, 1920 (Ranke 1920)
and

Peter A. Piccione, *Mehen, Mysteries and Resurrection from the Coiled Serpent*, 1990 (Piccione 1990).

Ranke thinks that MEHEN is a hostile entity which one had to overcome and to escape to earn the prices of eternity; Piccione constructs (out of a misinterpreted text) “mysteries of MEHEN” (in the sense of cultic mystery plays), through which the initiated can earn “rebirth” in the fiery breath of the MEHEN-snake. We don’t find such a concept in Egyptian theology.

Now we will examine the original functions of the god MEHEN, which will lead us to new conclusions about the metaphysical meaning of Egyptian board games, taking the following way:

- I. The boardgame Mehen (named after the god)
- II. The role of MEHEN (the god) in the funerary texts
 - A. MEHEN in the royal books of the netherworld in the New Kingdom (NK; c.1575-1000 BC) (where his role is more obvious than in the older texts)
 - B. MEHEN in the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom (OK; c.2700-2160 BC) (contemporary to MEHEN, the boardgame)
 - C. MEHEN in the Coffin Texts of the Middle Kingdom (MK; c.2060-1650 BC)
- III. The symbolism of Mehen (the boardgame) in the light of these sources
- IV. The function of the god MEHEN as the deity of the boardgames in general and the conversion of the symbolism of Mehen to other boardgames, especially *Senet*.

The order New Kingdom - Old Kingdom - Middle Kingdom may seem a little “chaotic”, but it is the most practical way to examine the role of MEHEN in the funerary texts, taking the less complicated NK sources as a base and adding to this the missing details from the older texts.

I. The Boardgame Mehen

At the dawn of the Egyptian culture, MEHEN even lent his name and his shape to a gameboard. The so-called *Mehen* is probably one of the most famous Egyptian board-

games (besides Senet). It was played in the Early Period (c.3000-2700 BC) and in the OK on a round board, showing a spiral track of gaming-squares in the form of a coiled serpent (fig. 1). There are ten complete gameboards preserved and fragments of at least four other ones. Only these fragments and one of the complete boards come from regu-



Fig. 1

lar excavations and can therefore be dated. This last example was found at the proto-dynastic cemetery at Ballas, belonging to the Neolithic Naqada culture, which runs from about 4000 BC to the beginning of dynastic Egypt around 3000 BC. The excavation of Naqada and Ballas was published very badly (Petrie & Quibell 1896: P.15 NR.19, P.42, T.V19, T.XLIII2) and so the burial in question cannot be dated exactly, it is, however, probably late Naqada (just before 3000 BC). The Fragments came from the grave of King Peribsen of the 2nd dynasty (Early Period).

We know six pictures of the game in progress (fig. 2), ranging from the OK to the first Intermediate Period, plus two, which are uncertain, and two depictions of Mehen-boards without players. In the Tomb of Hesire, 3rd dynasty, a complete Mehen gaming set is depicted. Here we can learn that it was played with three ivory lions and three lio-

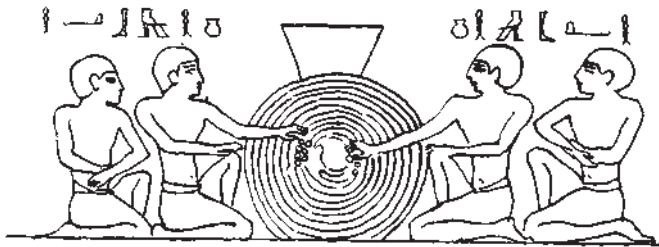


Fig. 2

nesses as gaming pieces, and six sets of six coloured marbles but without dice. The game's name is well recorded, inscribed besides the gaming scenes. Literally, "*Mehen*" just means "the coiled one". In the OK the god MEHEN even bears the MEHEN-gameboard in the hieroglyphic writing of his name. Certainly the boardgame Mehen depicted the god MEHEN and had a metaphysical symbolism based on this entity. One has first to examine the role of MEHEN (the god) in general, as described mainly in the funerary texts, to find the symbolism of Mehen (the game), which on the other hand is a prerequisite for understanding the relation of the god MEHEN to other games.

II. The role of MEHEN (the God) in the Funerary Texts

The main source for the god MEHEN are the funerary texts. In this instance only the most significant examples will be discussed to make my point clear.

These texts were written on the walls of the graves or coffins and on papyrus scrolls and buried with the deceased. The first known corpus of funerary texts are the Pyramid Texts of the late OK, written on the inner walls of the kings' pyramids. Out of these developed the Coffin Texts of the MK, written on the coffins of commoners, and the famous Book of the Dead in the NK, written on papyrus scrolls or (parts of it) on the walls of the tombs of both kings and commoners. All these texts were collections of spells to help the deceased overcome the obstacles of the afterlife. The corpus undertook great changes in the course of this development, but many spells can be traced from the beginning to the latest examples (however distorted). In the NK a new category of funerary texts arose, again first restricted to royal tombs. These texts were not collections of spells but descriptions of the netherworld and especially the nightly journey of the sun-god through this chthonic realm. The oldest and most famous of these so-called "Books of the Netherworld" is the *Amduat* (Egyptian "What is in the Netherworld"), others are the Book of Gates, The Book of the Night, The Book of Day, The Book of Caves, etc.

A. MEHEN in the Royal Books of the Netherworld in the NK

In the NK, the god's main purpose was certainly to protect the sungod Ra inside the coils of his serpent body while passing the netherworld, travelling back to the east underground during the night. So the spiral posture of the god is dictated by his function. Most probably his natural model was the Nubian Python Sebae, which protects his eggs in the same manner.

This is easily learned from the texts of the Books of the Netherworld, especially the *Amduat*. Like the night itself, the netherworld is divided into twelve hours. These are seen as rooms or caves and Ra travels these realms by barque on a river that runs straight through all the hours. So the inhabitants have got light only once a day for an hour, when the sungod passes by.

In the *Amduat*, MEHEN first appears in the seventh hour (fig. 3), when Ra needs his protection most urgently - in this very hour the great struggle against Apophis takes place, the god of non-being and overfiend of the Egyptian pantheon. MEHEN replaces the shrine below which the sungod is usually standing on his barque (his posture is due to the



Fig. 3

mode of depiction, the idea is that MEHEN is laid in spirals all around Ra). An inscription describes the danger for Ra in this hour: Apophis drinks the water of the netherworld river to force the barque to stop. After the description of the dangers of this place it is immediately emphasised that the sungod does not travel here without his bodyguard: “This god travels in this place guarded by MEHEN” (*Seshem* = “to guide”, but also “to accompany, to escort”). MEHEN remains in his place up to the 12th and last hour.

Still in the seventh hour (upper panel) we find Osiris, equally protected by a MEHEN: “This god is Osiris within MEHEN... ...The fire of ankh (MEHEN) is against them (Osiris’ enemies), he burns them!” – MEHEN is called “*ankh*” (“life”) here and on some other occasions. It is nevertheless clear, that MEHEN is always meant. It is interesting, that MEHEN is described here as spitting fire. This is the only example in the NK, but we will find another in the OK Pyramid texts.

In contrast to what is stated in the *Amduat*, in the Book of the Gates and in the Book of the Night, MEHEN escorts Ra on his barque from the beginning.

In the first hour of the Book of the Gates we find an important variation the depiction of MEHEN’s posture (fig. 4): here Ra hasn’t got his usual anthropomorphic form, but is depicted as Khepri, the morning sun, in form of a beetle inside a sun disc. So it was much easier to draw MEHEN really surrounding him - and the Egyptian painters took this opportunity: MEHEN takes the form of a closed circle around Ra, a development of the original spiral form and a predecessor of the Uroboros.

In the 11th hour some of the gods, punishing Apophis, are praying to Ra: “Come, Ra! ... Behold, we have slain Apophis, who is in his shackles! You don’t come near to your enemies, Ra, nor ascend your enemies (to you), Ra. Your secludity appears, (you who are) in MEHEN”. All this has the same meaning: That Ra is in the MEHEN, means that he is secluded and his enemies cannot come near him. In the middle panel of the same hour



Fig.

the two-headed god “His-two-Faces” is protected by six Uraeus-cobras, which surround him and so make up a “Mehen of the Uraei”, as is inscribed besides the scene. Peter A. Piccione (Piccione 1990) thinks that the two-faced god is MEHEN himself, but this makes little sense.

The word “mehen” is used here in a broader sense as “protection” or even “protecting coils”.

B. The Role of MEHEN in the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom

For earlier times, the evidence is less clear. One has to ask whether the function of MEHEN was the same as in the NK. In the OK, contemporary to the boardgame Mehen, we find MEHEN mainly in the Pyramid Texts – besides the inscriptions accompanying the gaming scenes (these are obviously just sayings of the players. They are very valuable for the reconstruction of the rules, but not for the metaphysical meaning and therefore they can be omitted here). The Pyramid Texts were the principal funeral texts of the OK. The noun Mehen is mentioned four times in these Pyramid Texts.

It is first mentioned in spell 332. The subject of spells 333 and 334 is obviously the ascend of the dead king to the sky and to Ra, a main theme of the Pyramid Texts in general. Spell 332 must be interpreted in this context: “N⁽²⁾ is the one who came out as MEHEN, N ascended with his fiery breath, being turned about”. Older translations gave: “N is this one who escaped from the coiled serpent (or: gameboard), has ascended in a blast of fire, having turned himself about (or: is returned)”, or the like. [Ranke 1920; Sethe 1935; Faulkner 1969; Piccione 1990]

But this would make little sense, as MEHEN isn’t a hostile entity, that one wanted to escape (a change of meaning is possible, but not such an absolute inversion of alignment), and the genitive pronoun “his” as well as the “turning” remain as unsolved problems (the suffix genitive pronoun “.f” = “his” is only preserved once (pyramid of Teti), and has been omitted by all former translators). The translation “is this one, who came out as MEHEN” does not cause such problems. It is a common feature of the Pyramid

texts that the king identifies his body parts or his whole person magically with certain entities in order to ascend to heaven (as a holy bird, a scarabæus beetle, etc.). If we now assume that MEHEN has a similar role as in the NK, then the king in the shape of MEHEN becomes one of the closest companions of Ra on the sun-barque. So also the otherwise difficult to interpret “fiery breath” causes no more problem: the king comes as MEHEN *with his* fiery breath (for MEHEN spitting fire see above). The phrase “being turned” of course describes the bearing of the king as the coiled MEHEN.

In **spell 659** of the Pyramid Texts N is identified with Horus, searching for his father Osiris. As Horus N shall hear the words of Ra in the chapels of the horizon. Then is written: “Take for you these your white teeth! They are within MEHEN, who is wound around these as arrows in their name ‘arrow’”. “Take for you(is the normal phrase for the dead, who can use his body parts again. It is not clear why the king’s teeth are named “arrows”, but one has to think of the ivory arrow-heads that are often found in the tombs of the Early Period. After this paragraph, the body parts of N are protected, he gets the honoured places of the gods Anubis and Geb, but is also warned to keep this, his new court, well. Three themes are dealt with in this spell: 1. Osiris and Horus, 2. Ra, 3. the bodily unharmedness of the dead king. Getting a place among the gods is a natural consequence of this all. Ascending to the sungod Ra and becoming Osiris (the mummy-formed dead god, lord of the netherworld, murdered by his brother Seth) are two different models of the royal afterlife, but are commonly seen side by side in the Pyramid texts. Here, the king doesn’t become Osiris, but his son Horus. However, “Horus” is just another incorporation of the same entity. The Egyptian king, incarnation of Horus, becomes Osiris after his death, his son or successor becomes the new “Horus”. Horus is the living form of Osiris, who is always thought of as a corpse, being the “first of the westerners (= the dead ones)”. And this is exactly what the dead king wants – not to lie in the chthonic underworld as Osiris, but to live as Horus and join Ra, choosing the celestial concept of afterlife. This may sound speculative, but surely the dead king is joining Ra as Horus in this spell. There he “stands in the chapels of the horizon”, the place of Horakhti (a form of Ra).

The two other OK mentions of MEHEN are only preserved in the pyramid of Queen Neith:

Spell 626: “Recitation: Neith came out as a swallow, she landed as a falcon. The face of Neith is in the MEHEN of Shesmu, she divides the lords and separates the ladies.” It is very common in the Pyramid Texts that body parts are assigned to certain deities. Shesmu, the god of the wine-press, has obviously nothing to do with MEHEN or the ascending of Queen Neith. It is probably an ancient misreading of “*seshem*” - “to escort” (the spellings are very similar in hieroglyphic). This word was regularly used to describe the purpose of MEHEN as bodyguard of Ra. The correct translation may be: “The face of Neith is in the escorting MEHEN” or the like.

The meaning of spell 626 is parallel to spell 659: Neith becomes a (Horus-)falcon, ascends probably (even if not expressed) to Ra, MEHEN protects one of her body parts and then she attains great powers.

Spell 758: “Neith has conceived through the nose, Neith has born this through the

nostril. Neith recovers in your coils, Neith sits in your MEHEN". The reception through the nose is obviously a play on word using "*mes*" - "to give birth" and "*mesdet*" - "nostril", having nothing to do with MEHEN. As the gods often grant life (= breath) through the nose, this is not too remote a conception. However, Neith finds rest in "your coils" and "your MEHEN". "You" is the "Lord of the horizon", probably a form of Ra-Horakhti himself. Neith wants to be with him and rest inside the coils of his MEHEN.

Results of the OK sources: In the Pyramid Texts MEHEN has already the function of protecting Ra within his coils. From this general function derive two meanings of MEHEN for the dead: First, as a *protector* in general, for Ra, other gods (Osiris), and of course for the deceased himself and his different body parts, especially the teeth (as we will find again in later texts). Secondly, as a synonym for the *proximity of Ra*. Reaching Ra's barque not only means to have light all day rather than only one hour, but also the reunion of the body with the soul, i.e. the final goal of eternal life. The dead is thought to become Osiris, the corpse-god dwelling underground. But Osiris is the body of Ra, and Ra is the soul of Osiris (NK sources). When Ra visits Osiris' cave in the night, Osiris is reunited with his soul, and so is the deceased. But he wants more: to become a *living* Osiris, i.e. Horus, and ascend to Ra in heaven, rather than waiting for him, thus being united for eternity. The deceased wants to do so through the help of MEHEN. After this the dead inherits great divine powers. We can assume that Mehen, the boardgame, has the same goal: to reach the centre of the spiral snake on the gameboard with one's gaming pieces and so, symbolically, to join Ra on his barque (with all metaphysical consequences). The exact concept is reported more clearly in the coffin texts of the MK.

C The Role of MEHEN in the Coffin Texts of the MK

From this time we do not have any Egyptian sources for Mehen as an actively played game. However, the connection between the god MEHEN and the game Mehen is still remembered at least in the spelling, as MEHEN is still written with the boardgame hieroglyph in some cases (this will change in the NK).

Spell 493: "My body will not be pulled away or compelled, for I am this body over whom Atum wept and whom Anubis buried. My soul (is with) my body and my shadow is in his place, (because) I am guarded by the 'Cutters' (divine executioners) within the hiding of MEHEN". After this, the safety of the dead is further expressed and it is said that her fiery breath will not be removed from her. Former translations by Faulkner "for I am indeed a guard of the prisoners after the secret matters of the coiled one" and Piccione "I am the guard of the criminals after (the manner of) the mysteries of MEHEN" not only do not make any sense, but they are questionable for certain reasons of spelling. If "*mek*" here would mean "the guard", it would have been spelled with a determinative of person. And the idea that N wants to become a guard hardly fits into the context. The subject of this spell is N's own safety. So "I am guarded" is a much better translation. The word "*Khebenty*" is determined with the hieroglyph "sitting god", so it cannot mean "criminal" derived from "*kheben*" - "to commit a crime"). It probably means "cutter", derived from "*kheba*" = "to cut" (which is often spelled without the "á"). The same word is also used for "execution", so the "cutters" are probably divine executioners. Such are

commonly found in the Egyptian netherworld. “*Sheta*” originally means “secret, hidden”, it can also mean “mystery”, but “hiding place” makes far more sense – the “*sheta*” of Mehen is not his “mystery”, but just the save, hidden place within his coils.

Spells 758-760 are recorded only once on the coffin of Sepi (Cairo Museum, Journal d’entrée 32 868; Catalogue général 28 083). The illustration of these spells shows a sitting figure, surrounded by the “paths of MEHEN” (fig. 5). Spell 758 is written in an ellipse around the vignette: “These are the protected paths of fire. The larboard side of MEHEN surrounds (Ra) in a million after a million (times)”. As MEHEN lies on the barque and sur-



Fig. 5

rounds all passengers, one of his sides can be assigned to the larboard, one to the bow, etc. To “surround” is written as “*pekher*”, the same verb that is used for the surrounding MEHEN. The “paths” are just a paraphrase of MEHEN himself. The word for “larboard side” means also “larboard guard”, a perfect description of MEHEN’s purpose. Obviously the Egyptians in some point of the tradition confused the word “*wat*” = “sides of body” with the equally sounding “*wat*”, meaning “path”. Logically, the “paths of MEHEN” are identical with his body-sides. Nevertheless, new ideas are introduced: the deceased now has to walk upon these “paths” to reach Ra. As this vivid imagination is probably also depicted in the Mehen-boardgame, as we shall see, it must have been developed before the OK. However, to the theological funerary texts it was introduced only in the MK.

The spell continues: “The rejecting gates of the coiled ‘bow-side’ of MEHEN: these doors are the protected place of shining Ra”. If MEHEN is thought of as “paths” sur-

rounding Ra, then he needs gates, which “reject” the god’s enemies, but hopefully let the deceased pass by.

In **Spell 759** the deceased speaks: “As for the existence of this MEHEN: it is for Ra. A million after a million (cubits) is its length. The barque: starboard side, bow, stern, larboard side are four million (cubits). I enter it. All eneads are in this (too), on each of his sides, and these are divided in four sides”. The huge size of MEHEN is expressed, as is that of the barque. The two are obviously identified. The dead Sepi enters MEHEN and the barque and joins the inner circle of the gods. After some further descriptions of the “paths of fire” there is written: “I know this: this is the character of the ‘backs’. I am on them every day, seeing my father Ra”. The “backs” are obviously the (fourfold) back of MEHEN, *i.e.* his “sides”, *i.e.* the paths of fire. MEHEN himself forms the spiral paths, that lead to Ra, and the deceased walks inside on MEHEN’s back. However, it is still MEHEN’s main purpose to hold back the enemies, and so the paths are furnished with fire and other difficulties, as we shall see. The spell continues: “Sepi is the one, Sepi is on the ‘backs’. I will not rebel against Ra in his MEHEN. Sepi is within his (MEHEN’s) body. Oh, I know the dark ways, on which Hu and Sia arrive in the four ‘dark snakes’ (*i.e.* MEHEN with his four sides), it is bright behind them and in front of them. I arrive with them on the secret path, in which the brow of Ra is hidden”. The paths are dark to hold back the enemies, but Sepi knows them. He enters together with Hu and Sia (lesser deities of authoritative utterance and cognition and members of the sun-barque’s crew), who have the necessary light. Here and elsewhere Sepi must *know* the paths of MEHEN. It is a common feature of Egyptian belief that *knowing* the names and characters of the places and inhabitants of the netherworld is the main requirement for reaching eternity. Below we find: “Make paths for me! Open for me the doors in MEHEN! I know the circles of Ra and those, which are between them. I also know his dangerous ones (*lit.*: ‘enemies’) within the doors. I know a way for me... ..against them. Make a path for me! Sepi really lives, heir of eternity... ..Sepi is inside the distant barque, which MEHEN surrounds daily...”. The figure that is depicted besides these spells sitting inside the “paths of MEHEN” has been interpreted as Osiris, as Ra or as MEHEN himself. In fact, he is primarily Ra, the normal “inhabitant” of MEHEN, but he is also Horus, who has become Ra, and he is the deceased, who has become, like Horus, Ra. The deceased is, as usual in Egyptian belief, identified with Osiris, and he unites with his soul, *i.e.* Ra. This is why the figure wears a form of the Osirean Atef-crown.

In **spells 1101 through 1103** the deceased meets, overcomes and passes subsequently the guards of four doors. The first door is called the “outer” one, so the doors are obviously set, one after the other, on a path leading inwards. After having passed the last door, it is written: “Who is the one who has gone round MEHEN?”, and in spell 1104: “I have gladly arrived!”

Results of the Coffin Texts sources: The Coffin Texts give an extensive description of the vivid conception of the Egyptians concerning the deceased’s ascending to Ra through MEHEN. The idea of walking inside, using MEHEN’s body as a path, is of course the symbolism behind the boardgame of Mehen. From this mythological analysis we can even learn something about the rules. It is clear that the goal of the game was not to

“escape” from the inside of the spiral track, but to reach the centre, coming from the outer end (the tail of the snake). Even the “repelling gates” can be found on the gameboard as the marked squares, so these were probably obstacles in the course of the game.

In the NK Book of the Dead MEHEN is still mentioned in connection with the ascending of the deceased to Ra, sometimes as Horus, and even the nautical named body sides and the “paths of MEHEN” are mentioned again. However, there are no new concepts, and the chronological distance to MEHEN (the boardgame) is great now, so these examples can be omitted here. Only one, **spell 172**, presents interesting problems: In the context of all parts of the deceased’s face, the teeth are again assigned to MEHEN: “Your teeth are inside MEHEN, on which the two Horuses (i.e. Horus and Seth) have played” (not “your teeth are the teeth of MEHEN”, as translated before. “*Tep*”, meaning “daggers (of the mouth) = teeth (of a snake)” is only recorded once (spelled differently!), and is obviously a pun, not a regular word. Here one has to translate “*tep*” just as “on, in”).

The fact that the deceased’s teeth are inside MEHEN only means that they are well protected. Horus and Seth have nothing to do with the teeth. It is just a specification of MEHEN that “they have played on him”. As we have seen, the symbolical goal of the boardgame Mehen is to win a place at the side of Ra, which means the final goal of eternal blessed life, and also the heritage (so literally in CT spell 759) of the divine powers. Horus and Seth normally fight over the heritage of Osiris, which means divine kingship and overall power (of course, not over Ra, but, after all, Osiris is Ra). So they naturally play for this on the Mehen-board, or perhaps on a gameboard more suitable for the NK, but it is still MEHEN who grants eternity as a reward for winning the game. It is remarkable, however, that in the NK gaming is still associated to MEHEN so closely that he was specified by this feature.

III. MEHEN and Other Boardgames

The last mention of Mehen (the boardgame) is the very uncertain depiction of the making of a Mehen-board at Moalla, tomb of Ankh-tifi, dating to the first intermediate period, whereas all other depictions are dating to the OK (apart from two depictions from the late period, Theban Tombs 36 and Walters Art Gallery Baltimore 22.152 – 153, which are clearly copies from earlier graves). The surviving gaming materials are even older, mostly from the first two dynasties (“Early Period”). In Cyprus the game survived to the time contemporary to the Egyptian MK. We can take it for granted, that it was still known in Egypt, even if not included in the funerary cult and therefore not preserved.

However, Mehen came out of fashion in Egypt long before the emergence of the NK. The well-known Senet became the single boardgame of greater religious importance. It was played on a rectangular board of 3x10 squares using dice and 5 gaming pieces for each player. The first certain example of Senet is the depiction of the gaming set in the tomb of Hesire, 3rd dynasty, OK. We find some depictions of men playing

Senet in the OK and MK, but always in the context of other games and festivities. Since the 2nd dynasty, the hieroglyph “*men*” used mostly in words which mean “to stand”, “to endure” and related meanings, depicts a Senet-board. Apart from those, most depictions, textual references and original gameboards of Senet come from the NK⁽³⁾. Much has been written “In Search of the Meaning of Senet” (Piccione). However, the role of Mehen analysed here may cast new light upon this notorious subject.

There is one text, the so-called great boardgame text, dealing extensively with the mythological background of Senet. This text, however, is only preserved in three copies: papyri Cairo 58 037 and Turin 1775 and inscribed in the Theban Tomb NR. 359.

Of far more importance is the reference to Senet in the **Book of the Dead, spell 17**: “Playing Senet, sitting in the sekh-hall, going forth as a living soul by N”. Apart from the many copies in the preserved books of the dead, there are many depictions of games of Senet in the tombs of the NK, among them the world-famous scene from the tomb of Queen Nefertari (fig. 6). Nearly all of these show the grave-owner sitting in front of

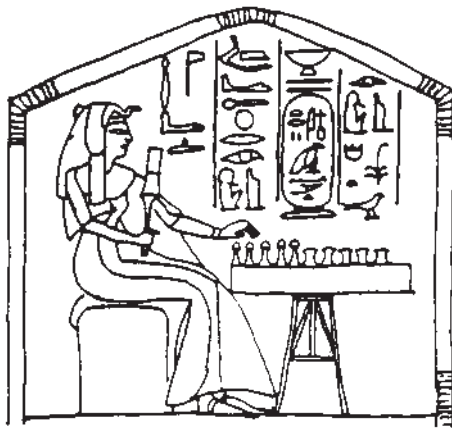


Fig. 6

a Senet-board in the typical sekh-hall (in fact, this is a mere sort of pavilion). They are merely a magnified version of the illustration in the Book of the Dead papyri. Often, parts of spell 17 are inscribed near the picture. Even the instances without such clear signs are obviously parallel⁽⁴⁾. So the religious significance of Senet is certainly based on the book of the dead, spell 17, and the game mentioned there. The tomb owner plays this game clearly in the netherworld, with an unknown partner, as he is normally depicted alone⁽⁵⁾. Of course Senet is not just a heavenly amusement. There was a special single match the deceased had to play in the afterlife, and it had a certain meaning. The nature of this meaning remains uncertain, and spell 17 provides little help. So we must take a look at the great boardgame text where MEHEN appears as the opponent in a symbolically interpreted game of Senet (with the different squares assigned to certain deities) against the first person writer, who is marked as dead through the offering formula. So this game takes place in the netherworld, too. The victory of the writer is drastically told, and MEHEN reacts exactly like a losing player: his fingers drum, his heart leaves

him, he is “bitter”. But he does not act hostile as Ranke suggested (Ranke 1925: 27f), he is just the divine gaming partner who will grant the deceased a favour as price for winning the game. After he has won, MEHEN tells him: “You are justified”. This sounds modest, but it is the most common Egyptian expression for the status of a blessed soul. It sums up in one word the final goals of the afterlife. These have changed since the OK, and ascending to Ra is not longer the central theme. But at the beginning of the text, in the offering formula, the dead prays to “the great crew of the Per-nefer”. The “*Per-nefer*”, the “good house”, is normally the place of embalming, but here it refers to an equally named square on the Senet-board, which is marked on all preserved boards and therefore very important, perhaps the goal of the game. The word “crew” has nautical meaning and the deities mentioned here are probably members of the crew of the sun-barque. Moreover, Heka, Hu and Sia are named, known members of the sun-barque’s crew. As these entities are rarely named in offering formulas, we can assume a certain meaning. After this, the dead wishes to “enter the hall of the thirty, that I may become the thirty-first god”. There is a “trial of the thirty gods” in Egyptian mythology, but it is rather unimportant and rarely mentioned, in comparison to other divine groups. Here the number thirty is obviously just chosen to match the thirty squares of the Senet-board. The gods, who the dead wants to accompany, are probably the ones mentioned before, the crew of the sun-barque. So the gift of MEHEN has remained the same as in older times: to reach Ra on his barque. He grants this after playing a game of Senet with the deceased in the afterlife. If this match could be connected with the metaphysical game of Senet par excellence, i.e. the one mentioned in spell 17 of the Book of the Dead, it would be most helpful in interpreting the latter and therefore the meaning of Senet in general. A limestone fragment from Deir-el-Medine, tomb of Neb-nefer (Theban Tombs 6), from the late 18th / early 19th dynasty (Time of Horemheb - Ramesses II. See: Bruyere 1930: 158; Porter & Moss 1964: 706; Pusch 1979: 295; Rothöhler 1997: Nr. H53) has been considered to be part of a gameboard, but this is uncertain. However, it bears an inscription: “Word to say by the one sitting in the sekh-hall besides MEHEN, enjoying playing Senet...”. According to the partly reconstructed transcription given by Pusch (1979: 72) the inscription of the Senet playing scene in the same tomb (of Neb-nefer) reads as follows: “You are sitting in the sekh-hall besides MEHEN, enjoying playing Senet”. As shown by the mentioning of the sekh-hall, and even more by the context of the wallpainting, these texts clearly mean the game of Senet that takes place in spell 17 of the Book of the Dead. However, MEHEN is mentioned too, and surely he is not just accompanying the player, but takes place in the game himself. He is the “unknown” opponent and we can clearly identify this match of Senet with the one described in the great boardgame text.

Now it should not be difficult to tell the metaphysical meaning of Senet in general: The idea of reaching Ra and thus earning the status of a blessed soul by winning a boardgame has been developed from the Mehen-game of the OK. As the Mehen-board was symbolically identical with MEHEN himself, and depicted the way to Ra through MEHEN, the idea that the god MEHEN granted this favours as price of the game derived naturally from this concept. This function he retains in the NK, when the board-

game Mehen was out of fashion long since. Now it is a game of Senet that the deceased plays against MEHEN in the afterlife, but the price has remained more or less the same: The game of Senet in the NK represents the struggle of the deceased for a place on the barque of Ra and thus the status of a blessed soul and eternal life. I do not think however, that the Senet board represents the “way” through the netherworld to Ra’s barque. The squares of the board are not lined up in a defined track, as on the Mehen board, and the gaming pieces seem too numerous to represent the deceased’s soul. Senet is just the typical boardgame of the NK, and MEHEN, the god of the boardgames, grants his favours for winning the game. Of course, one can have a different opinion in this point and may search for the way “passing through the netherworld” on the Senet board.

That MEHEN was indeed the patron of the game of Senet is expressively stated on a gamebox from the middle of the 18th dynasty (Museum of Turin, NR. Sup. 8451) in an offering formula: “MEHEN the noble, the lord of the Senet and Hathor, the lady of Aphroditopolis”. A fragment in the British Museum (Ranke 1920: 28) must be added here too: “An offering given by the king to Horakhti and MEHEN in Senet”.

The “Little Boardgame Text”, only preserved once (Kendall 1978: 57f.), is even more difficult to interpret than the “Great” one, but it seems to fit well in our interpretation: “He sees the sun’s disc; he joins the stars and unites with the heavenly bodies ... He guides the tiller of the god’s boat and rows in it ... he has enjoyment in the thirty houses of Senet. MEHEN is before him ... you make a play ... the road is open...”.

MEHEN gained his affinity to Senet not because of any close relation to this special game, but because he had become the god of the boardgames in general. Senet inherited its metaphysical meaning from Mehen. It may have had an older symbolism of its own. Perhaps this was the communication between this world and the next one, as suggested by Peter A. Piccione. But by the NK, the main purpose of Senet in funeral context was clearly to board the barque of the sun.

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Notes

1. I shall write the Name of MEHEN the god in capitals in the following to distinguish it from Mehen the boardgame. *Mehen* is pronounced with an aspirated “h”. In this article, I generally do not give Egyptian words and names in proper Egyptological transcription, which only shows the consonants and is hard to read for non-Egyptologists, but in a pseudo-vocalised form. This is the way, Egyptologists normally pronounce Egyptian words. It’s not the original vocalisation of the ancient Egyptians, which is very hard to reconstruct.
2. I will use in this article the abbreviation N in the position of the deceased’s proper names, which of course vary in the different copies of a funerary text.
3. The mentioning of Senet in Book of the Dead 17 has a MK forerunner in Coffin Texts spell 335, which is however far less important than its omnipresent NK counterpart. This MK afterlife game of Senet may or may not have had the connection with MEHEN, which is proved for the NK game by the great boardgame text. In neither case it would defeat the theory presented here.
4. There is but one NK depiction of a game of Senet, that is not clearly related to the Book of the Dead spell 17 (the one showing king Ramesses III in Medinet Habu).
5. Sometimes he is accompanied by his wife or other close relatives, but then they just sit by his side, not taking part in the game itself. There are two or three examples with an – unnamed – gaming partner, but the omission of such a basic feature in the standard form of this scene is still significant.