

“The Monkey Race” – Remarks on Board Games Accessories /

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In the ancient Near East, games represented an essential dimension in social life. It is because they are closely related to another principle, important in the stability of human communities: the notion of divination.⁽¹⁾ Knucklebones and dice were used not only for games of skill, but also for divinatory purposes. Thus, their casting is perceived as an expression of divine will, determining the movement of pieces or pegs in different games of chance. The study of games in the ancient Near East cannot be envisaged without turning our attention toward Egypt. In fact, information on ancient Egypt – not only iconography but also material more widely conserved due to favourable climatic conditions – allows for interpretation of the relatively marginal material which interests us here.

In studying the Louvre’s collections, I became interested in board games and in particular in race games. We see several variations of these games in the Near East, most often derived from Egypt. Two players or two teams should complete the circuit – composed of squares or holes – with the object of reaching the goal through the use of pieces or pegs. Despite their popularity, the rules and the names of these games remain unknown. Today’s expressions allowing us to name these games derive most often from a description of the board: for example, the game of “20 Squares”⁽²⁾ or the game of “58 holes”.⁽³⁾ The fact that many of the accessories composing these games were unretrieved – namely boards, pieces or pegs, dice or knucklebones – aroused my curiosity and led me to research possible traces, bearing in mind that, in addition to problems of conservation linked to climate, there could also be errors in interpretation of the material. I became particularly interested in the game of “58 holes”.

Because of its wide geographical dispersion and its existence over a long period of time, it lent itself to a variety of versions, offering a richness in forms, iconography and materials. Its name refers to two symmetrical circuits of twenty-nine perforations, one of which each player must complete, thus making a total of fifty-eight (Fig. 1). The players, each possessing five pegs, start from the posts marked A and A’, and follow their respective circuits which lead to the goal, marked H. Certain of the cavities are differen-

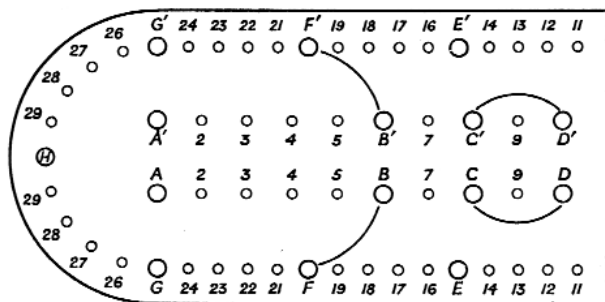


Fig. 1. Egyptian Board Game (XIXth-XIIth dynasties) (Murray 1952: 15, fig. 3)

tiated by inlays, or motifs in the form of a rosette, or inscriptions denoting the stages in the evolution of the game. Some of the posts (B-F and C-D) are linked by a line which permits a player to advance his piece or, on the contrary, obliges him to retreat. This category of game closely resembles the English game of “Snakes and Ladders”, during the course of which a piece situated at the bottom of the ladder can climb and advance several rungs on one throw, whereas landing on a snake causes him to go back several rungs.

The game of “58 holes” appeared in Egypt at the end of the First Intermediate period (ca. 2200 BC) and enjoyed a lively success in the Middle Kingdom. We lose its trace until the Coptic period, during the course of which a similar game was again in vogue.⁽⁴⁾ On the other hand, the practice of the game in the Near East was maintained from the IIInd millenium until the Ist millenium BC. There are several expressions which serve to designate this game. Thus, the term of “Shield Game” illustrates the rectangular or elliptical form adopted by certain boards. The game pegs, frequently designed with the head of a dog or jackal, sometimes cause the game to be called “Dogs and Jackals”. Finally, the best preserved set at this date is called the “Palm Tree Game”⁽⁵⁾ because of the plant decor in the centre of the board (Fig. 2). It comes from Thebes and is currently housed at the Metropolitan Museum of New York. The fact that it was found with its ten pegs – and significantly we note the difference in size between the two sets of pegs – distinguishes it from numerous isolated findings. The games are in fact rarely found comple-

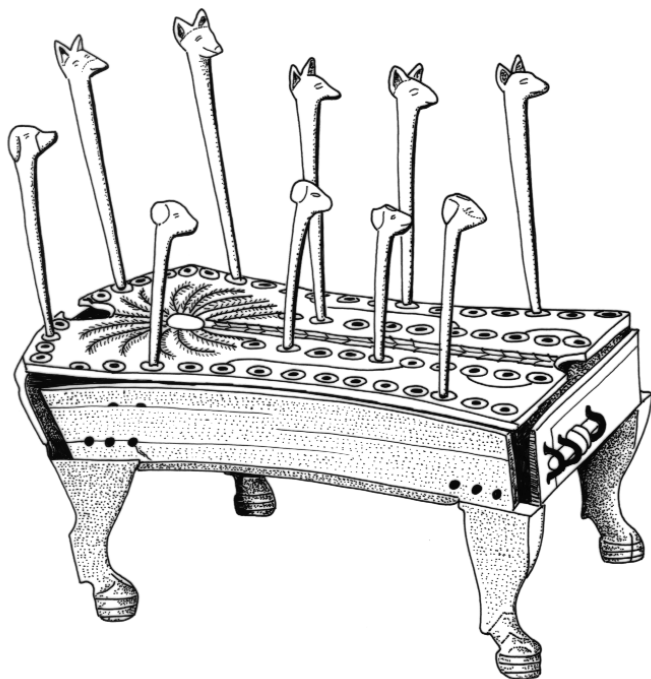


Fig. 2. “Palm Tree Game”, Thebes, Egypt, Metropolitan Museum (drawing Caroline Florimont, Musée du Louvre).

tely intact and, as a result, problems of identification can arise: for example, certain boards can be mistaken for a kind of abacus and vice-versa. We can turn now to the problems involved in the identification of the game pegs.

In Egypt, several types of pegs are found in ivory or in bronze. Aside from the dog and the jackal, other animals – cats, horses, or sparrowhawks – are represented on top of the pegs. It seems surprising that no similar pieces are to be found in the Near East where this game was widely played from the beginning of the IInd millennium to the middle of the Ist millennium, in Palestine (Gezer ⁽⁶⁾, Megiddo ⁽⁷⁾), in Mesopotamia (Ur ⁽⁸⁾, Babylon ⁽⁹⁾) and in Iran (Susa ⁽¹⁰⁾, Tepe Sialk ⁽¹¹⁾, Luristan ⁽¹²⁾). Ivory tokens with a notch at the top were found at Megiddo and linked to board games by the excavator. ⁽¹³⁾ Moreover, ivory pins with a dog or jackal head were mentioned for the same site. ⁽¹⁴⁾ At Ur, undecorated pegs are cited. ⁽¹⁵⁾ Certain pegs, much like boards and dice, were obviously made of wood which is a perishable material. Others, notably those fashioned out of ivory or metal and which have survived up until now, have probably been ignored or erroneously catalogued as pins. This possibility seems plausible when observing the contents of the “Dépôt du Temple d’Inshushinak” ⁽¹⁶⁾, a group of objects found in the Temple precinct of the god Inshushinak, city god of Susa.

This deposit gathers artefacts with different functions and dates, thought to have been buried at the end of the Middle Elamite period, in the 12th century BC. It comprises, in particular, fragments of limestone games of “58 holes” (Fig. 3), knucklebones and carts with animals identified as probable toys. ⁽¹⁷⁾ The boards belong to the anthropomorphic group: the upper end is called “the head” and the lower one, “the foot”. In

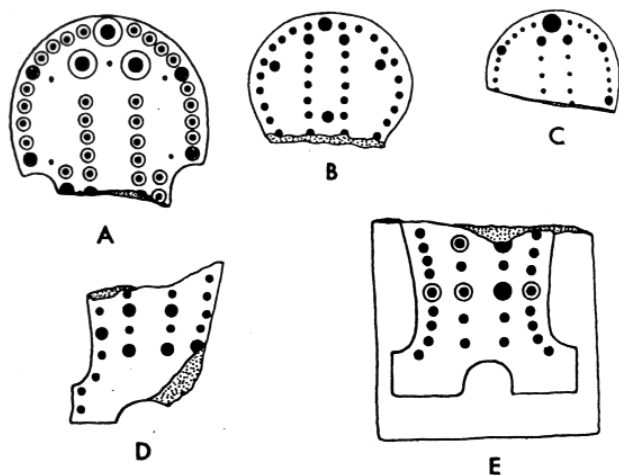


Fig. 3. Board games from the “Dépôt du Temple d’Inshushinak”, Susa, Iran, Musée du Louvre (Ellis & Buchanan 1966: Fig. 2).

one of them, bronze elements have been found, broken at the surface of the stone. These residues are obviously the lower parts of the game pegs now broken, which thus were made of bronze. Among items in the cache, the excavator cites “une épingle dont la tête

est en forme de petit taureau”⁽¹⁸⁾ which could be a game peg (Fig. 4). Its height (6.3 cm) is not really surprising in view of the thickness (1 cm to 3.3 cm) of the boards present in the deposit. In fact, such a disproportion is often notable between boards and pegs; the latter can sometimes exceed 20 cm.⁽¹⁹⁾ The top of the bronze peg considered here is decorated with a seated monkey, and not a bull. A smaller squatting monkey in lapis-lazuli, pierced in order to be fixed to a peg, is also comprised in the deposit.⁽²⁰⁾ It could be a token. If the bronze and lapis-lazuli sets of monkeys belonged to the same game, the difference in material and in size allowed for a distinction of the opposing teams. Concerning the size, this fact has already been emphasised above for the pegs of the “Palm Tree Game”.

Monkeys, an exotic curiosity, probably imported from India, have been favoured in Elamite iconography. Their faculty to imitate people explains why they have often been represented in a human attitude, playing a musical instrument⁽²¹⁾, for example. According to Barbara Parker, Babylonians thought that monkeys had the ability to repel demons and bad spirits because of their grotesque likeness to humans.⁽²²⁾ The choice of this animal as an intermediary for players, anxious to increase their chance of winning, is fully justified. Moreover, two Egyptian game pieces in the form of baboons, dating from the Ptolemaic period, are housed in the Metropolitan Museum of New York.⁽²³⁾ Elsewhere, a monkey, like the lion and the gazelle on the “Satiric Papyrus” in the British Museum, replaces a senet amateur on a satiric ostrakon from Deir-el Medineh.⁽²⁴⁾ While playing the favourite Egyptian game, the monkey is stung in the tail by a scorpion in order to ameliorate his score or, on the contrary, to be pushed out of the game. Let us now turn to chronological problems raised by the material from the Susa deposit and rendered difficult by its disparity.

Generally, the boards, according to their form or iconography, offer more elements for fixing dates than the pegs or the knucklebones. The board games in the cache date from the Old Babylonian period, circa the 19th century BC, as compared to a game from the Yale Babylonian Collection, itself attributed to this period according to a relief carved on its side.⁽²⁵⁾ Concerning the peg with a monkey, it belongs to the category of wax casted pins, present in Susa since the Uruk phase, circa 3500 BC, and consequently difficult to date precisely. Other metal pins – in gold, silver, or bronze – with monkey figurines are attested in Elam⁽²⁶⁾ and Mesopotamia⁽²⁷⁾ in the IIIrd and IInd millennia. This large span of time allows us to associate our monkeys to the board games and to propose a supplementary name for this game: “The Monkey Race”... New perspectives for the interpretation of certain pins might then appear.

Games – vehicle to read the destiny – are often found in tombs as important elements of the funerary offerings. Moreover, even incomplete, they had their place in a



Fig. 4. Peg with a monkey figurine, “Dépôt du Temple d’Inshushinak”, Susa, Iran, Musée du Louvre (drawing Caroline Florimont, Musée du Louvre).

high quality deposit dedicated to the Lord of Susa, Inshushinak, who has among other attributes, that of the Judge responsible for the last judgments of the deceased.

Notes

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12. P. Amiet, *Les antiquités du Luristan*, Paris, 1976, p. 98, n° 240.
13. Loud 1939 (as n. 7): 20, pl. 53, 258-261.
14. S. Erdős, *Les tabliers de jeu dans l'Orient ancien*, Maîtrise d'Archéologie orientale, Paris I, 1986, p. 83. I have been looking for this material in the publications related to Megiddo but for the moment I have not found it.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
16. Mecquenem 1905 (as n. 10): 61-130.
17. Mecquenem 1905: 99-100, pl. XXIII, 104-106, figs. 345-351.
18. Mecquenem 1905: 89, pl. XVIII, 5.
19. *Jouer dans l'Antiquité*: 156, ill. 154.
20. Mecquenem 1905: 116, fig. 398.
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