

BACK TO THE GAME: REFRAMING PLAY AND GAMES IN CONTEXT AN INTRODUCTION

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This volume has its genesis in the 21st Conference of the International Society for Board Game Studies (BGS)¹ held in Athens in April 2018, entitled “Dialogues and Interactions”. Organized by Barbara Carè, it was hosted by the Italian School of Archaeology and the Benaki Museum. 28 years after Irving Finkel’s path breaking conference *Ancient Board Games in*

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¹ See the 2018 BGS programme on <https://locusludi.ch/locusludi-conferences/>. Founded in 1997, the International Society for Board Game Studies aims at investigating the history and development of board games throughout the world as well as promoting exchanges between scholars, curators, collectors, and contemporary creators of games. Since 2001, the society’s colloquium is held annually.

Perspective hosted by the British Museum in 1990,² and 23 years after Alex de Voogt's first BGS colloquium in Leiden 1995,³ the wide range of topics addressed in this symposium demonstrated the wealth of knowledge to be gained thanks to the study of board games as research objects in varied fields such as anthropology, cognition, and digital reconstructions.

One entire session, organized by Véronique Dasen and Ulrich Schädler, was specifically devoted to recent research on Greek and Roman game equipment, including boardgames. All the authors collected in this volume contributed to the symposium. This session formed part of the project *Locus Ludi. The Cultural Fabric of Play and Games in Classical Antiquity* funded by the European Research Council (ERC), which aims at recording the spatial distribution of gaming devices according to chronology, typology, context, reconstructing the development of ancient games as well as investigating games as the material fabric of ancient communities, questioning the identity of the players and the function of games according to context, domestic, public, sacred, funerary.

The identification of games, especially board games, and the study of their cultural role in ancient societies is a complex undertaking with many methodological issues. This pluridisciplinary volume focuses on case studies where games can be reframed in their archaeological and cultural contexts. Three axes, distributed according to the type of evidence and chronologically ordered, explore archeological sites and monuments, visual arts and literary genres ranging from the Late Minoan period (15th century BC) to the reception of ancient ludic culture in contemporary literature.

The first part is devoted to archaeological evidence. Six papers assess the difficult task of identifying ludic material culture and address critical issues involved in the interpretation of game-related objects. They highlight a series of methodological problems, in particular the multifunctionality of the items and the intersections between games and ritual activities. The selected range of contributions provide a well-documented image of how context matters.

Laetitia Phialon (*Amulets, gaming pieces, toys or offerings? Thoughts on animal figurines and funerary practices in the Late Bronze Age Aegean*) discusses gaming pieces unearthed in a tomb of the Late Bronze Age Crete and explores the polysemic value of the small-size animal figurine associated with this

² FINKEL 2007.

³ DE VOOGT (ed.) 1995.

assemblage, suggesting a ludic function for this class of artefacts spread in the Aegean, concurrent or preceding their role as offerings in sacred and funerary spaces. The review of the extraordinary cone shells group from the 1974 excavation at the Mycenaean citadel – the largest currently known from the Late Bronze Age Aegean – offers to Vassiliki Pliatsika (*Why so serious? An extraordinary cone shell group from Mycenae and the problem of identifying Mycenaean board gaming Material*) the opportunity to reflect on the interpretation of these items as gaming pieces and to emphasize the social and cultural significance of games in Mycenaean Greece, whose culture of play is still scarcely known. For a better understanding of this material, the assemblage is examined in detail in association with the other finds from room Θ3 of House Θ and compared with other large cone shell groups from Mycenaean contexts. Looking at stones with circular depressions (“cup holes”) uncovered in Temple 4 at Kition, Jérémy Lamaze (*Games and oracular practices around the hearth: the “table of offerings” from the so-called Temple 4 at Kition-Kathari (Cyprus)*) touches upon the blurred boundaries between game and religious rituals, turning back to the well-known concern regarding these stones: “for games or for gods?”. Although their interpretation as “table of offerings” is abandoned, their use as gaming stones is still controversial, and J. Lamaze recalls that they may not be completely devoid of ritual significance.

Gaming device are one of the expressions of social identity in Archaic Greece. Two papers explore their meaning in Greek funerary contexts where they belong to the construction of a material and metaphorical a discourse about the deceased which can be variously interpreted. For Dimitris Paleothodoros (*Board games equipment from archaeological contexts in archaic Attica*), who reviews the evidence for Attic decorated terracotta dice and game boards in graves ranging from the middle of the 7th to the middle of the 6th century BC, the practice had a specific social and ideological meaning related to the notion of leisure, and it was intended for the (male) upper classes. Archaic game equipment can also function as status markers for women. Women are never depicted, nor described playing dice and boardgames in this period which appears as reserved to men, as in the extensive series of vase painting showing Achilles and Ajax. Archaeological finds contribute to deconstructing this male centred view. Victoria Sabetai (*A Boeotian die in context: Gaming pieces, jewellery, seals, spindle whorls and bird bowls in a female burial of status*) offers a significant new addition by presenting the first known 6th century Boeotian die, made of clay, unearthed in an

undisturbed rich female grave in Boeotia, with a peculiar configuration of twenty-five dots instead of six. The detailed study of the funerary furnishing reveals a possible early set of gaming pieces composed of shells, stored in a wine vessel with five pebbles alluding to the *pentelitha* game. The assemblage contributed to the metaphorical self-representation of the high status of a young deceased and her family in Archaic Greece.

Similar identification issues are raised by the study of Roman period gaming material. In Cremona, different categories of tools – dice, glass lenticular counters, bone counters and a token with a rectangular body – were unearthed during excavations of late Republican/early Imperial houses in the city of Cremona. Lynn Arslan Pitcher and Chiara Bianchi (*Roman game finds from Cremona (Italy)*) revise the past interpretation of these items, whose destination is still controversial. Possible ludic functions can now be evaluated based on comparison with new material of the same period. The identification, chronological setting and function of board games carved into stone floors in the public and urban space are another matter of debate. Barbara Carè (*Pavement designs and game boards from public spaces of ancient Athens: a review across the board*) addresses the dating and meaning of the designs preserved on the ancient and Roman Agora and Hadrian's Library at Athens. She offers an overview of the pavement motifs, of their features and locations in order to propose a plausible dating of their engraving and of their use according to their contexts. In this ancient urban landscape, several designs and patterns long assumed to be playing boards should be reconsidered, and a number now appear to date not earlier than Late Antiquity.

A second part is dedicated to the study of visual representations of boardgames or gaming devices, in sacred or funerary contexts, which often have a strong metaphorical dimension. Five contributions, based on the study of Greek and Roman monuments from funerary and sacred contexts – marble steles and plaques, statues and terracotta figures, provide new insights on the social, gendered, and religious dynamics of games.

The relation of board games, abaci and education is evidenced on a late 5th century BC funerary relief from Krannon (Thessaly) which may represent the earliest depiction of a “pebble” mathematician. The man sitting before a board carved with five lines could be training the boy standing beside him and playing with his dog. For Véronique Dasen and Jérôme Gavin, the five lines pattern is envisaged from a wider perspective

as part of a training system including games as well as numeracy (*Game board or abacus? Greek counter culture revisited*). They suggest a new way of reckoning with the five lines design. Coming of age is also the focus of Despina Ignatiadou and Irimi Papaikonomou (*The knucklebone and the goose playing and jeopardy for the boy of Lilaia*). The knucklebones held in the hand of an early 3rd century BC chubby and smiling statue of a boy found in Lilaia (ancient Phocis), related with the healing cult of Kephissos, can be interpreted as an iconic sign symbolising luck and healthy growing. A unique scene of board-game is analysed by Maria Chidioglou (*A playful coroplast? a new look at the terracotta group of the early roman board-game players NAM 4200 and related finds*). An early Roman terracotta group found in 1855 in a grave from modern *Syntagma - Constitution Square* in Athens depicts a man and a woman interacting, seated at a table playing *Polis*, or another game similar to the Roman *ludus latruncularum*, in the company of a dwarf. Impressed images on the back of the seats of the players can be interpreted a visual discourse on victory or defeat ideology.

Ulrich Schädler (*Catacomb games: reused game boards or funerary inscriptions?*) raises the question whether marble boards for “XII scripta” or “Alea”, used to close loculi in Christian catacombs near Rome, are re-used game boards (as hitherto suggested) or funerary slabs in the shape of game boards produced for sepulchral use. He observes that the boards from the Catacombs differ in shape from boards that were really used for playing, and that the hexagrams have subliminal to clear sepulchral references. Francesco Muscolino (*Une tabula lusoria ou « triple enceinte » et l’inscription funéraire de Agate filia comites Gattilanis à Milan*) discusses the association of a funerary inscription with a Nine men’s morris design on the funerary slab of Agate, daughter of an Ostrogoth comes, dated to 512 AD. Were the pattern and inscription deliberately combined or were they just connected in a secondary, funerary, use of the slab. Did it depict a Nine men’s morris design with a ludic function? Most likely the design is not for a game board. but has a symbolic function.

The third part addresses punning allusions to board games in ancient and modern literature. Geoff Bakewell (*Plato plays Polis*) examines the political references of Socrates to the ancient boardgame *polis* in Plato’s *Republic*; like *pessoi*, Callipolis’ guardians are trained to be equal and interchangeable. The throws of dice and knucklebones could also be diverted for Fortune-telling based on Greek hexametric verses. Homeric

epics were thus transformed in Late Antiquity into lot-oracles preserved in papyri and ostraca (Salvatore Costanza, *Rolling dice for divination, gambling and homeromanteia*). Another transformation of board games as a plot motif is found in ancient and modern fiction. Ioannis M. Konstantakos retraces how storytelling was adapted to the rules and phases of riddles and boardgames (*Board games in ancient fiction: Egypt, Iran, Greece*) since the ancient Near East (1st millennium BC), in the Demotic Egyptian *Tale of Setne Khaemwaset* (Saite period), to Apion in Late Antiquity.

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