

EARLY MANCALA AND *TĀB* BOARDS FOUND IN ISRAEL (AND IN SOME OTHER COUNTRIES)

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Abstract. Excavations in Israel of Byzantine and early Islamic sites have yielded some interesting gaming boards that are not always understood by the archaeologists who found them. Because they are organised in parallel rows of ‘holes’, most are presented as ‘mancala’ gameboards – which some may be, indeed; however, boards offering three or four rows of squares or depressions cannot reasonably be mancalas, nor can they be held as ‘senet’, the Egyptian game. So, what are they? Reviewing the relevant literature, this article will try in this article to disentangle these finds, the more so as they are often well dated to periods which have rarely been looked into.

Keywords: Mancala, *tāb*, Byzantium, Early Islamic times, archaeology

Byzantine mancalas?

In 2000, Michael Sebbane published two carved board games found in the courtyard of a Byzantine *villa* at Horvat ‘Aqav (Israel) (Sebbane 2000). One is a nine-men’s-morris board, the other is a rectangular stone slab with three rows of seven cup-holes (on which more below). Sebbane identified this pattern as a ‘mancala’, but this is questionable. However, and interestingly, in support of his conclusions, Sebbane offers a short list of similar ‘mancala’ boards found in Roman-Byzantine sites in Israel. That the Horvat ‘Aqav board is unique in having three rows is thus evident. The others are 2x7-patterned boards which may well be mancala boards though a 2x5 board from *Sepphoris* (Zippori) might correspond to a late survival of

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the Greek game *pente grammai* as Ulrich Schädler has shown (Schädler 1998; Schädler 2009).

If we put apart the Horvat ‘Aqav three-row board, which is certainly not a ‘mancala’ board, and also the small 2x5 board from *Sepphoris*, there remain three games with two rows of seven cup-holes: the Achziv board (which presumably is ‘Byzantine’), the Khirbet Bir el-Isyar board (found near a well “which contained remains of a settlement from the Roman-Byzantine and Ottoman periods”...), and the Geva board, found near a Byzantine winepress.

Dating these gameboards is problematic: the possibility of a much later date, from Islamic (Mamluk or even Ottoman) times, cannot be ruled out. Only the Geva ‘mancala’ seems to be more firmly dated, but its being next to a Byzantine winepress is no definite proof. Michael Sebbane concludes: “In summary, the total body of information that is available to us indicates that mancala games have been common in the region of Israel from the Byzantine period on.”

If we assume these three gameboards are ‘Byzantine’, i.e. from 400 to 700 CE,¹ then they would be slightly earlier than the so-far earliest known dated mancala boards, which were found in Matara, Eritrea, by Francis Anfray (Anfray 1990). There the French archaeologist dug out a fragmentary earthenware board which he assigned to the 6th–7th centuries CE, as well as a couple of two-row boards carved in limestone, that he dated between the 6th and the 8th century. Other such boards, probably of the same period, were found at Yeha and at Asmara (now also in Eritrea) (Pankhurst 1971: 154; see also Phillipson 2002: 77), that is, in an area which used to be the ancient Kingdom of Aksum (Anfray 1990; Phillipson 2002). It should be highlighted that there is no evidence of earlier such finds throughout Africa.

An Ethiopian cradle for mancala is thus a very likely hypothesis.² From Aksum the game would have spread to Arab countries and to inland Africa. The Aksumite ‘gabata’ boards may be the oldest mancala boards. But the ‘Byzantine’ boards found in Israel would not only mean the game was somewhat older than the Aksumite examples found by Anfray: they would testify to an early presence in the eastern Roman Empire, with which we

¹ In Western Asia, the Byzantine, or Late Roman, Period ends with the Islamic conquest, in the 7th century.

² Although see de Voogt 2021 for a more cautious appreciation.

know Aksum had tight relationships (Phillipson 2002: 64, 69) not to mention its conversion to Christianity in the 4th century CE.

Tāb in Ancient Palestine

As we have just seen, some arrangements of rows – two or three – are often interpreted by archaeologists as ‘mancala’ gameboards. But three-row boards cannot be held for mancalas, for this special arrangement is only found in Ethiopia and must have three rows of six holes.³ Therefore, we must look for another interpretation. The game *tāb* appears to be the best candidate, even if Byzantine times seem to be quite early. Mancala expert Alex de Voogt indeed explains: “The game of *tāb* is frequently confused with four-row mancala as archaeologists are rarely familiar with *tāb*.” (De Voogt 2021: 4).

In my 2001 article “Jeux de parcours du monde arabo-musulman” (Depaulis 2001a), I had tried to collect the earliest references to the game *tāb*. I wrote:

Les témoignages anciens ne manquent pas, puisque Franz Rosenthal (Rosenthal 1975) a trouvé une mention dans un poème de 1310 (sous la forme *tāb wa-d-dukk*) et que le jeu est déconseillé par Ibn Hajar al-Haytamî (1504-1567) dans son traité de morale *az-Zawāḡir*. À la fin du XVII^e siècle, Thomas Hyde lui consacre pas moins de deux chapitres: “De Tābiludio seu ludo Tāb” (Hyde 1694: II, 217-223) et “De ludo Kiôz” (id.: 223-224).

(“There is no lack of early records, since Franz Rosenthal (Rosenthal 1975) has found a mention of *tāb wa-d-dukk* in a 1310 poem, and the game is banned by Ibn Hajar al-Haytamî (1504–1567) in his treatise on morality *az-Zawāḡir*. In the late 17th century, Thomas Hyde devotes no less than two chapters to the game: “De Tābiludio seu ludo Tāb” (Hyde 1694: II, 217–223) and “De ludo Kiôz” (id.: 223–224).” My translation.)

So, in the Near-East at least, the earliest (literary) occurrence was 1310.⁴ However, in a second article in the same issue of *Board Game Studies* (Depaulis

³ They actually are two-row mancalas with nine holes for each side, three of which being simply folded inside to form a central row of six, as explained by Deledicq & Popova 1977: see below.

⁴ Actually in a poem by Ibn Dāniyāl, as quoted in Rosenthal 1975: 44.

2001b), I showed that a similar Scandinavian game called *daldos* (in Denmark) or *daldøsa* (in Norway) had come from Western Asia, where the Varangians – the ‘Eastern Vikings’ – had been in contact with various people – Abbasid and Khazar merchants, Byzantine officials – in the 10th–11th centuries.⁵ From the early 10th century to the late 11th century, Viking mercenaries had formed the “Varangian guard” which protected the Byzantine Emperors. It is clear that the Scandinavians brought back the game of *tāb* before they left the country. We know the route that led from Byzantium to the Baltic Sea, the so-called ‘Route from the Varangians to the Greeks’; its main hub was Kievan Rus’, a state founded there by the Varangian prince Rurik, and which was ruled by his descendants.

No surprise, then, if we hear of possible *tāb* games found in Novgorod, a city in western Russia which was on the main road connecting the Black Sea to Scandinavia and which flourished during the Middle Ages. Excavations conducted in this town in the 20th century have unearthed many objects of daily use, including gaming pieces. Among the latter were three wooden slabs with markings that are similar to the *daldos* gaming boards from Denmark and Norway (Grinev 2018). One of them, dated to the mid-11th century, has eleven divisions, while another, of late 11th–early 12th century, has fourteen, divided by three lines (Figure 1), which makes fifteen intersections, and a third one, dated to the mid-13th century, has sixteen divisions (seventeen intersections). They were found in the archaeological area called Nerevsky. Not only, according to A.M. Grinev, do they recall the ‘boat’ shape that is typical of *daldos* boards, but the rectangular dice which were found in numbers are strikingly similar to their Danish/Norwegian counterparts. As Grinev remarks: “Findings from Novgorod confirm the hypothesis about the penetration of *daldos* and *sahkku* into Northern Europe along the river routes of Eastern Europe at the end of the Viking Age.”⁶

⁵ Graham-Campbell 1994; Haywood 1995; Kromann & Roesdahl 1996.

⁶ From the English summary of the article.



Figure 1: One of the wooden gaming boards found in Novgorod, Russia. late 11th–early 12th century. (From Grinev 2018).

According to all studies of the topic, after 1100 CE, the Scandinavian presence in Southeast Europe and the Black Sea area declined: the “Varangian guard” was disbanded, and Kievan Rus' began to disintegrate. My conclusion was that:

A ‘race game with direct capture’, in a simple, ancestral three-row form was in existence in the Eastern Mediterranean region, probably in the Islamic world, by the 10th century at least. (...) Like chess, it was borrowed by the Byzantines from the Arabs.⁷ When the Vikings arrived, either as mercenaries – the so-called Varangians – or as merchants, they discovered the game, liked it and brought it back (...) to their homeland. This must have taken place before 1100, when Viking contacts with the South-East [of Europe] ceased.⁸

Therefore, we can assume an earlier dating for the existence of *tāb*: “by the 10th century at least”.

In the absence of literary sources before 1310, we must turn to archaeology. Hopefully, here and there in Israel, archaeological

⁷ A statement which, from the discoveries I shall present, seems less grounded.

⁸ Depaulis 2001b: 82.

publications have reported the finds of generally misinterpreted gameboards, showing three rows of a dozen squares (or more) each, and dubbed “sort of mankala” or “extended senet”. Some of these games have four rows of ten to fourteen squares. Most are dated as ‘Byzantine’ (5th-7th century) or ‘early Umayyad’ (661–750 CE). Here follows a review of these finds.

Let us come back to Michael Sebbane’s 2000 article about the two carved board games which were found in the courtyard of a Byzantine *villa* at Horvat ‘Aqav (Sebbane 2000). His so-called “pitted game board” is a rectangular limestone slab with three rows of seven neatly carved cup-holes (Figure 2). Of course, it cannot be a ‘mancala’ board. No mancala with three rows of seven holes is known to exist, and we know from Deledicq & Popova (1977: 72–3) that Murray’s uncommon “Mancala III” boards are in fact “one-cycle” mancalas – thus akin to two-row games. This peculiar configuration, typical of Ethiopia, demands that all three lines offer an even number of holes, since one half of the central row belongs to a side and the other, to the other. Therefore, a 3x7 pattern would be unpractical for playing mancala.

Sebbane dates the Horvat ‘Aqav board to the Byzantine period (“i.e., in the 5th to 7th centuries CE”), without ruling out Mamluk times (“but this is not very likely”). If it is not a mancala board, assuming it is a game, the best hypothesis is that it is a *tāb* board. It seems to be incomplete, so that the exact number of holes cannot be stated.

If this *tāb* board is really Byzantine, this would confirm my theory of an early presence of *tāb* games in the Byzantine Empire and its borrowing therefrom by the Varangians. However, we must take care that in Israel ‘Byzantine’ means the 5th to 7th centuries CE, whereas in Byzantium the period covers many more centuries. Byzantinologists would call the 5th to 7th centuries ‘Early Byzantine’, or ‘Late Roman Empire’,⁹ while the time when the Varangians wandered in the region would be ‘Middle Byzantine’ (843–1261).¹⁰ Being so early, the Horvat ‘Aqav board could point to a

⁹ For this periodisation, see Kazhdan *et al.* 1991, ‘Byzantium, History of’.

¹⁰ A period that is divided into two historical subdivisions in Kazhdan *et al.* 1991: Age of Recovery and Consolidation (*ca* 800/850–1000), sometimes called “Macedonian Renaissance”, and Period of “Westernization” and Empire of Nicaea (*ca* 1000–1261).

reversed direction in the spread of the game: from the Byzantine world to Arab conquerors... It is a pity we know so little about Byzantine games.¹¹

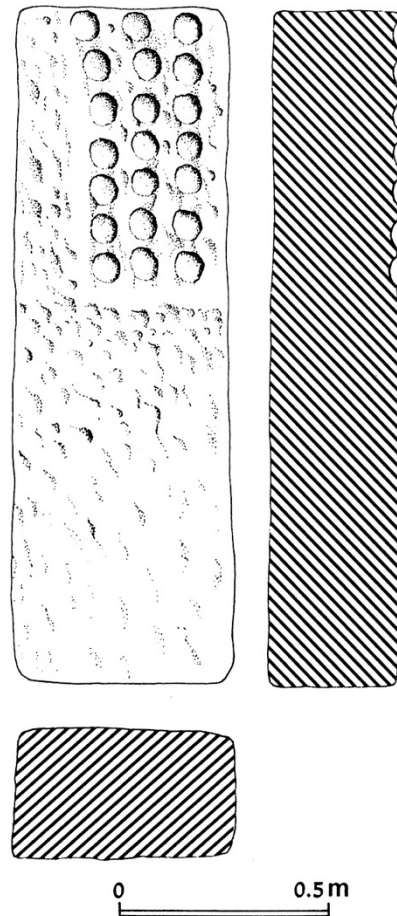


Figure 2: “Pitted game board” found in Horvat ‘Aqav (Israel).
(From Sebbane 2000: Figure 4)

The Horvat ‘Aqav board is not the only game of its kind found in Israel that can be dated to Byzantine or Umayyad times. More recently, the

¹¹ The sole study is Koukoules 1948, but it is based only on literary sources, some ancient, some spurious. There is no *tāb* or similar game in Walter Crist’s recent survey of “graffiti games in the Byzantine Empire” (Crist 2020).

excavations of the Western Wall Plaza in Jerusalem have dug out the eastern *cardo* of the Roman city and, as in many public places of the Roman Empire, gameboards were found, carved in stone. Michael Sebbane again has published them (Sebbane 2019). Among these games one shows three rows of fourteen squares each (Figure 3). Here is what Sebbane says about it:

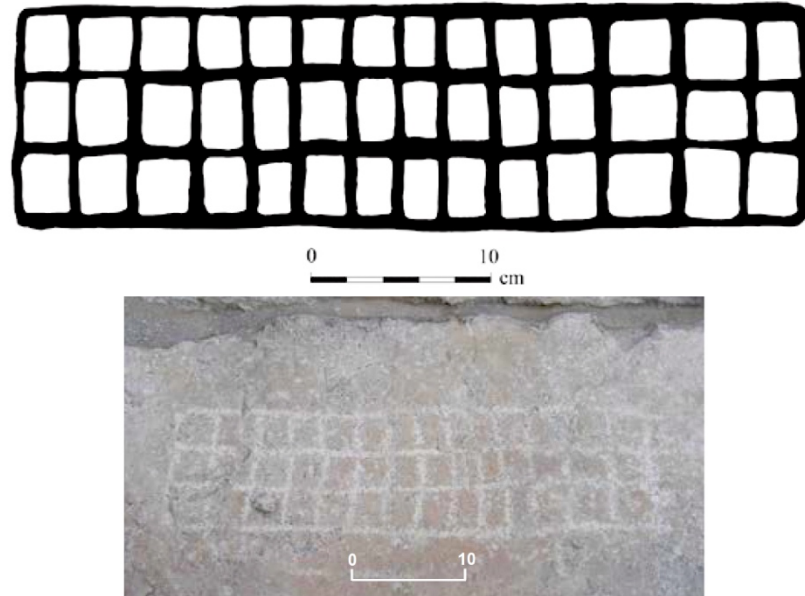


Figure 3: Board Game of the 3×14 Type. (From Sebbane 2019)

Board Game of the 3×14 Type

The board is incised on one of the Eastern *Cardo*'s Roman paving stones (Figure 5.11, Plan 5.1:7), which continued to be used as a paving stone during the Byzantine period. It should be dated from the 1st half of the 2nd century to no later than the 2nd half of the 7th century CE. The game board, 12.5×45.0 cm, was formed by hammering, apparently with a metal chisel. The board comprises three rows of fourteen squares each. The lines on the board are clear, although they are not straight and the squares are not of a uniform size, measuring between 2.5×3.0 cm and 3.5×4.0 cm.¹²

¹² Sebbane 2019: 159.

We thus have another example of a possible *tāb* game which would date to “no later than the 2nd half of the 7th century CE”. If it were a three-row *tāb*-board this one would be a very early example of the game.

Among the games found at Hammat Gader, near Lake Tiberias, published by Nitzan Amitai-Preiss (Amitai-Preiss 1997: 276-7, No. 1) there is one that he describes as “a sort of ‘Mankala’”, “carved in three parallel rows, each of which is made up of fourteen holes” (Figure 4). The gameboard is engraved on top of “the southernmost fountain of the western row in the Hall of Fountains (Figure 9).” Amitai-Preiss apparently was aware that a ‘mancala’ board with three rows of fourteen holes was not realistic. Indeed, Sebbane rightly remarks about it that “the depth and diameter of the holes indicate that they could not have been used in games where a number of counters would fall into one hole” (Sebbane 2000: 230, fn. 7). Rather than a ‘mancala’, Amitai-Preiss suggests to look towards *senet*, whose mechanics and rules he explains in detail, but he (rightly) concludes that the Hammat Gader game cannot be *senet*, since the Egyptian game “stopped being played at the end of the Roman period.” (And we know of no *senet* gameboards with three rows of *fourteen* holes!)

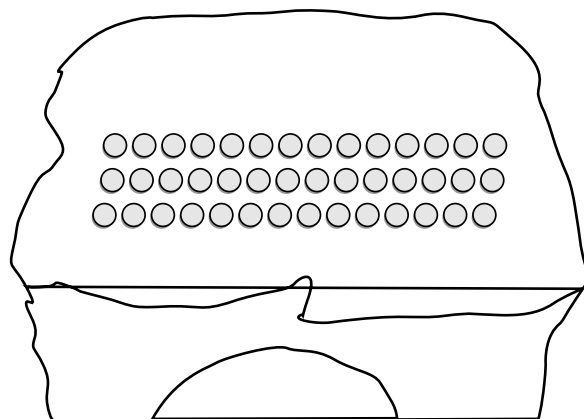


Figure 4: Schematic rendition of the Hammat Gader Game No. 1.

Also, it is interesting to note that “two game pieces [not illustrated] were found which could have been used in this game or others revealed in the same hall”. “Game No. 2” is a merels board for nine-men’s-morris; on the

other side of the same slab an alquerque is engraved. No. 4 – for the three games are four, like the Three Musketeers – is a *tawula* (backgammon) board which the author has been unable to identify.

So, if it is neither a mancala nor a *senet*, it is therefore tempting to interpret the Hammat Gader carved slab as an early *tāb* game with three rows of fourteen cup-holes. According to Nitzan Amitai-Preiss, “It may thus be assumed that this game at Hammat Gader postdates the Byzantine period, and it may have been engraved at the same time as the other two games.” (i.e. Umayyad times, 661–750).

There certainly are other so far unidentified such gameboards in the archeological mine that is Israel. It is sufficient to turn our eyes towards Capernaum, the ‘City of Jesus’ (and of Peter), where the Franciscan Brothers (who own the estate) have conducted excavations for a long time. It is in the second, 4th-century ‘White’ Synagogue that they have found some games incised on the pavement of the east courtyard (Corbo 1975: 169; Loffreda 1993: 34). Together with some classic merels games we can see one board that shows four rows of eleven (?) squares each (Figure 5), and another with four rows of thirteen squares or more each.



Figure 5: Gameboard scratched on the pavement of the ‘White’ Synagogue, Capernaum. 7th–12th century.

Dating is as always difficult, since the synagogue was abandoned during the 7th century CE (Loffreda 1993: 41), and remained “opened” to Arabs musing there, until the site was re-occupied by Crusaders in the 12th century; the games may have been scratched in the intermediary period (7th–12th century), which would place them not much later than the Horvat ‘Aqav, Jerusalem eastern *cardo*, and Hammat Gader gameboards.

***Tāb* in Saudi Arabia and Jordan**

Archaeological excavations have been undertaken in al-Yamāma, a place near Al-Kharj, in central Saudi Arabia. There, the Saudi-French Archaeological Mission unearthed a late Islamic mosque (16th–18th century), laid over an earlier mosque dating to the 8th–10th century CE. It is on the floor of the earlier mosque that scratched gameboards were found. “On plaster floor F. 015, twenty-eight engraved game boards were visible (...). Three distinct games were identified: the alquerque or *qirkat*, the game of ‘fourteen’ (a kind of mancala game), and chess.” (Schiettecatte, Darles, Siméon 2019: 257) (Figure 6).

From what one can see in the second excavation report (Schiettecatte & al-Ghazzi forthcoming), where all diagrams are drawn (see Figures 4.49–4.52), there are indeed a few alquerque boards, one small merels (no. 1), an unfinished nine-men’s-morris (no. 17), a grid that may be a chessboard or perhaps a *sija* board (no. 4), and ten more or less regular *tābs* (Figure 4.51), with three rows of fourteen depressions each (it is why the archaeologists called them ‘games of fourteen’). These games, which are often irregular and seem to have been hastily scratched, were found in the prayer hall of the Friday mosque, and date to between the 8th and the 11th centuries.

Here too we have to deal with rows – three again – of fourteen holes.

Similar gameboards were found in numbers in Petra, the Nabataean city in Jordan, not so far from Saudi Arabia. Although these scratched designs are undated, and may date from Umayyad times to... the 20th century – though certainly not to ancient Nabataean times¹³ – they are of interest. As it is stated in the Nabataea.net website,¹⁴ under ‘The Nabataean Game’:

¹³ According to Marie-Jeanne Roche, only two kinds of board games have been found in ancient Nabatean sites, a kind of *duodecim scripta* (two rows of 12 squares) and a 9x9 grid-like board, perhaps some sort of *latrunculi* (Roche 2009: 216).

¹⁴ <https://nabataea.net/explore/petra/ancient-board-games-and-the-nabataeans/>, last accessed 14/07/2023.

“Throughout Petra and in other Nabataean sites, we discovered that the most common ancient board game was from a game played on a 4 x 12 or in some cases a 4 x 14 playing board.” Although the presentation tries to explain that “The 4 x 12 game boards in Petra could easily be some sort of Senet boards”, Alex de Voogt, Ahmad B. A. Hassanat, and Mahmoud B. Alhasanat (de Voogt *et al.* 2017) have recently shown that these patterns are definitely *tāb* games. According to the authors, “boards seem to vary between four rows of seven to four rows of fourteen.”



Figure 6: Gameboard scratched on the floor of the old Friday mosque, al-Yamāma, Saudi Arabia. 8th–11th century. (© Thomas Sagory – Mission archéologique franco-saoudienne d’al-Kharj)

***Tāb* at Ephesus?**

In a paper presented at the 2023 BGS colloquium,¹⁵ Ulrich Schädler has revealed the presence, at Ephesus (Turkey), of two carved gameboards that exhibit four rows of 14 and 16 squares. Asked for more details, the presenter, who is preparing the publication of his long-awaited book about the gameboards of Ephesus (Schädler forthcoming), tells me there are indeed two games, one with four rows of 14 squares (Figure 7), the other with four rows of 16, both visible today in the Basilica of Saint John (whose construction is owed to Justinian and Theodora, in the 6th century) on Ayasuluk Hill. They clearly were retrieved from an earlier construction and re-used to consolidate the walls and arches of the church.

Dating is difficult. According to Schädler (Schädler, pers. com.), they would date either to the late 11th century, when the Seljuks were (briefly) occupying the site, or during the 14th century, after Ephesus had fallen into the hands of the Aydınoglu dynasty, and before the basilica collapsed, around 1400. The earlier dating is less likely, for the Turks remained just a few years (1090–1096) on the site, and carving games on the ground would



Figure 7: Gameboard incised on a stone that was re-used in 1957 to rebuild part of the church's nave. It is next to a nine-men's-morris board.
(photo © Ulrich Schädler, with kind permission)

¹⁵ “Arab and Turkish Games on the Ayasoluk”, a paper read as inaugural speech at the Ephesus 25^o Board Game Studies Colloquium, Selçuk, 11-14 April 2023. See also Schädler 2024: 135.

need a longer occupation. Therefore, a dating around the 14th century seems more probable.

***Tāb* in Portugal**

It is fascinating to find other gameboards offering three rows of fourteen holes as far West as Portugal. In this country, the Castelo Velho of Alcoutim, a Muslim fortress built by the Emirate of Cordoba and abandoned at the beginning of the 11th century, has several game diagrams, three of which, each made up of three rows of 14 or 15 holes, could also be *tābs*. Actually, the fortress of Alcoutim was built from the end of the 8th century and its peak was clearly in the 10th century. After that, the site was abandoned. We can therefore date these graffiti from the 9th or 10th century.

Here too, most of the gameboards have been misunderstood by archaeologists. Among them, three “mancala III” games, about which the authors of the exhibition catalogue¹⁶ offer some misleading comments. Hopefully Lídia Fernandes has included these gameboards in her 2013 book on gameboards engraved on stone in Portugal (Fernandes 2013), so that we can describe them here:

- gameboard MA-226 (Catarino *et al.* 2011: no. 19; Fernandes 2013: no. 61-26), comprises “3 horizontal lines of 13 to 14 cup-holes” (dimensions 34.5 x 21.3 x 3.4 cm)
- gameboard MA-225 (Catarino *et al.* 2011: no. 20; Fernandes 2013: no. 61-27), comprises “3 horizontal lines of 11 to 14 cup-holes” (dimensions 43.7 x 29.1 x 4.2 cm)
- gameboard MA-162 (Catarino *et al.* 2011: no. 21; Fernandes 2013: no. 61-28), comprises “3 horizontal lines of 14 to 15 cup-holes” (dimensions 29.2 x 14.1 x 2.4 cm)

These gameboards do not all show 3 x 14 holes, but it is striking to see that they are near that number.

An Egyptian curiosity

In his celebrated book *Objects of daily use* (Petrie 1927), W. M. Flinders Petrie presents in Chap. XIV, ‘Games’, a strange “Limestone slab with three registers of fourteen cup depressions on one side for use as gaming board” (Figure 8), now in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology of

¹⁶ Catarino, Dias, Teixeira 2011: 42–44, nos. 19, 20, 21.

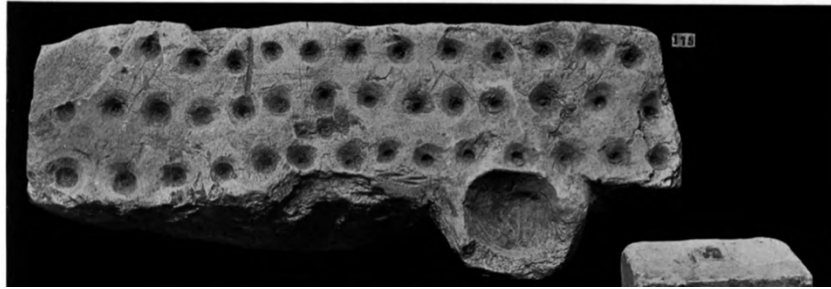


Figure 8: ‘The Game of Forty-two and Pool’. (From: Petrie 1927)

London, accession number LDUCE-UC59257, which Petrie called ‘The Game of Forty-two and Pool’ (because of the larger cup-hole on one side). The block is said to come from Memphis and of (possible) Ptolemaic period, but it may have been found on the surface of the site. A larger cup-hole is unusual but that does not make a 3-row *tāb* game impossible. It is unfortunately impossible to say more on this unexpected find. Even its dating to the ‘Ptolemaic period’ is unsure.

A chronology and some observations

If we set up a chronology of the above-mentioned finds (without the Petrie board), we obtain this:

Place	Reference	Rows x Cells	Date
Horvat ‘Aqav, Israel	Sebbane 2000	3 × 7 (at least)	5 th –7 th cent. CE
Jerusalem, Western Wall Plaza, E <i>Cardo</i>	Sebbane 2019	3 × 14	before 2nd half of 7 th cent. CE
Hammat Gader, Israel	Amitai-Preiss 1997	3 × 14	Umayyad (660–750)
Al-Kharj, Saudi Arabia	Schiettecatte et al. 2019	3 × 14	8 th –11 th cent.
Capernaum, Israel	Corbo 1975; Loffreda 1993	4 × 13(?) and 4 × 11(?)	between 7 th and 12 th cent.
Alcoutim, Portugal	Catarino <i>et al.</i> 2007; Catarino <i>et al.</i> 2011; Fernandes 2013	3 × 13/14 3 × 11/14 3 × 14/15	9 th or 10 th cent.
Ephesus (Selçuk), Turkey	Schädler forthcoming	4 × 14 and 4 × 16	14 th cent. 14 th cent.
Petra, Jordan	De Voogt <i>et al.</i> 2017	4 × 7 to 14	unknown

From this short list of gameboards, there is a clear tendency towards fourteen holes or squares per row, with the earliest of these games (Jerusalem, Hammat Gader, Al-Kharj) having 3 rows, while some other games (Capernaum, Ephesus, and also Petra) show 4 rows. Would it be an evolution of the game, from three rows to four?

The prevalence of fourteen holes or squares per row encourages us to re-read Rosenthal's section on 'Fourteen' (Rosenthal 1975: 43-44) with new eyes. Until then it was assumed that *arba'ata 'ashar* ("fourteen") was another Arabic name for *manqalah*. It was tacitly explained as the total number of holes in a 'classic' 2x7 mancala board.

Arba'ata 'ashar appears as the name of a game in the early 9th century in the *Ṭabaqāt* (*Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*) by Ibn Sa'd (784/785–845 CE), where we are told about the pious son of a caliph who smashed gaming boards of "fourteen", "as he did *nard* boards", in order to stop this game (Rosenthal 1975: 43). In his *Musannaf*, Ibn Abī Shaybah (775–849 CE) has "seven anti-fourteen statements", and to prevent children from playing this game it is suggested to give them walnuts. As Rosenthal comments: "Apparently, the walnut game was considered less harmful than *fourteen*, probably, because in the former no other stake than the walnuts themselves was involved."

The same name (and game) also occurs in another source of the same century: in his review of Rosenthal's book, R.B. Serjeant wrote: "To his *hisbah* [control of public order] sources may also be added Utrūsh¹⁷ of the late third [H]/ninth century [CE], prohibiting carpenters and turners from making *nard*, chess, and the '*arba'ata'ashar* boards (*RSO*, XXVIII, 1, 1953, 8)." (Serjeant 1977: 617), referring here to his own article in the *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* (Serjeant 1953). It is worth quoting here the summary given by Serjeant in his 1953 paper: "Carpenters and turners are prohibited from making backgammon (*nard*) pieces, chessmen, and the "fourteen" game (*al-arba'ata 'ašar*), the latter being described as *azlām*, i.e. *arrows for drawing lots*." (my emphasis) (Serjeant 1953: 8).

¹⁷ Al-Nāsir al-Hasan (c. 844–917), better known as Hasan al-Utrūsh ("Hasan the Deaf"), was a missionary of the Zaydi Shia sect, who re-established Zaydi rule over Tabaristan in northern Iran in 914, and ruled the province until his death (R. Strothmann, 'Hasan al-Utrūsh', In: *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online*, accessed 10/09/2024). His manual "is suited to what little we know of the social and political conditions in Dailam [more or less northern Iran] during the third century H [9th century CE]." (Serjeant 1953: 3).

Rosenthal goes on explaining that “*Fourteen* was identified with *manqalah* ‘mancala,’ which is first attested [under this latter name] in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*.” (Rosenthal 1975: 43). And, further: “*Fourteen* was further identified with *hizzah*, mentioned in ash-Shāfi‘ī’s *Kitāb al-Umm*, in the passage fundamental for the Shāfi‘ite attitude towards gambling. *Hizzah* is explained there as “a piece of wood in which there are holes for playing.”

Until then, we have no serious clue to decide which game ‘*arba‘ata‘ashar*’ is. The presence of “arrows for drawing lots”, as quoted in al-Utrūsh’s *Kitāb al-Ihtisāb*, strongly suggests the typical stick dice that are used in some race games, like... *tāb*. And there is a rage set in these early treatises to ban the game of ‘fourteen’, as if it were some kind of gambling.

It is also intriguing to read that al-Qābūnī (1382–1465), “when quoting from ar-Rāfi‘ī (d. 1226), in his *An-nāsikha li’l hurr wal-‘abd bi’tināb ash shatranj wan-nard*,”¹⁸ (...) thought it is necessary to explain ‘fourteen’ and added the note: ‘Take a piece of wood and dig in it *three rows* of holes in which are placed small pebbles with which it is played’.” (Murray 1952: 205). Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (1503–1566) clearly borrowed from both ash-Shāfi‘ī’s *Kitāb al-Umm* and al-Qābūnī’s *Nāsikha*, who themselves used various other sources. In Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī’s treatise on sins *Az-zawājir an iqtirāf al-kabā’ir*, commenting on the above-mentioned passage from the *Kitāb al-Umm*, the explanation became:

Hizzah is a piece of wood in which there are three [*sic*] rows of holes into which small pebbles are put for playing. It may also be called *fourteen*. In Egypt, it is called *manqalah*. In the *Taqrīb* of Sulaym,¹⁹ it is explained as a board in which there are 28 holes, fourteen on one side, and fourteen on the other, for playing. (Rosenthal 1975: 44)

This is a somewhat confusing explanation. Mancala boards with 28 holes, that is, 2 x 14, are unknown, at least in the two-row category of

¹⁸ ‘Abd-ar-Rahmān Ibn-Ḥalīl al-Qābūnī, *Nasīhat li-l-hurr wa-l-‘abd bi-iğtināb as-šatranj wa-n-nard* (Advice to the free and the slave to avoid chess and nard), a copy of which is in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Wetzstein II 1739-7. (My thanks to Ulrich Schädler who has found it.)

¹⁹ Abū ‘l-Fath Sulaim ar-Rāzī (d. 1055), who wrote a *Taqrīb* (‘approximation’), a work which seems lost. See *Ibn Khallikan’s Biographical dictionary*, translated from the Arabic by Bⁿ Mac Guckin de Slane, Paris / London, 1842, ‘SULAIM AR-RAZI’, 584-5.

mancala.²⁰ That *hizzah*, “also called *fourteen*”, “is a piece of wood in which there are *three* rows of holes” is surprising, but it clearly comes from al-Qābūnī. All this gives the impression of someone who does not know exactly what he is talking about. The pious Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī was probably not a ‘gamer’, and we can see in European dictionaries that most lexicographers know nothing about games. Many early (and some modern...) dictionaries mistake draughts for backgammon, or chess for any board game. It is clear that our Shāfi‘ī author has conflated different earlier sources without understanding the difference between *manqalah* (so called in Egypt) and *tāb*.

While *hizzah*, as explained as “a piece of wood in which there are holes for playing” by ash-Shāfi‘ī’s *Kiṭāb al-Umm* (c. 800 CE), would nicely fit a mancala board, ‘*arba‘ata‘ashar*, as it is mentioned in three 9th-century writings, appears as a ‘dangerous’ game, furthermore played with ‘arrows for drawing lots’, as reported by al-Utrūsh. From its very name, we may infer that there were fourteen holes. It has for long been assumed that it was the total of holes of a mancala board with two rows of seven holes each.²¹

Al-Qābūnī speaks of three rows, but in this case, it cannot be mancala for the reasons I have given in the beginning of this article. Three rows make us think of *tāb*, of course. And we have seen that three rows of *fourteen* squares or holes were not uncommon in these early times.

It is thus possible that ‘*arba‘ata‘ashar* is not mancala, as Rosenthal thought (following Murray), but another name for *tāb*, and more specifically boards with fourteen holes per row. The dates of the earliest written records – Ibn Sa‘d’s *Ṭabaqāt*, Ibn Abī Shaybah’s *Musannaf*, al-Utrūsh’s *Kiṭāb al-Ihtisāb*, all 9th-century writings – do not conflict with the archeological finds we have seen above, that point to the 7th–10th centuries.

²⁰ From a quick check in Murray’s Chapter 7 on two-row mancalas (1952: 158–204), and in Russ 2000, whereas there are boards with 12, 15, and up to 20 holes, I was unable to find a board with 14 holes per row.

²¹ It was Murray who first offered to identify ‘fourteen’ with mancala, drawing on al-Qābūnī, but his main interest was in the three rows, in which he saw an early evidence for his “Mancala III” theory (Murray 1952: 205). He was cautiously followed by Rosenthal, who actually entitled his section 7 ‘Fourteen’, not ‘Mancala’, a word that is almost missing in his text, save in Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī’s quotation (Rosenthal 1975: 44 and fn. 177).

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