

GRAFFITI GAMES OF CENTRAL MAHARASHTRA: NEW DOCUMENTATIONS, REVISION AND THEORY

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Abstract. This paper presents the findings of an ongoing research initiative aimed at the systematic documentation and analysis of ancient etched game boards across Maharashtra, with a particular focus on central regions of the state. Recent explorations within the Gautala Wildlife Sanctuary, including the Buddhist rock-cut caves of Pitalkhora and the Chalukya-era Shri Hemadpanthi Mahadev Temple, have revealed both isolated and multiple etched gaming boards, including traditional mancala variants. Additional fieldwork at the rock-cut caves of Aurangabad and active temples near the Lonar Crater Lake has led to the discovery of previously undocumented graffiti games and a potentially unique variant of supposed mancala not observed elsewhere in India. These findings contribute to a growing dataset that suggests a historically rich and regionally concentrated gaming culture. By combining new discoveries with previously collected data, the study explores spatial patterns, cultural continuity and the possible decline of these games. Through comparison with historical sources and ongoing dialogue with subject experts, this research aims to reconstruct the cultural memory associated with these artifacts and proposes new directions for understanding regional play traditions in India.

Keywords: Graffiti games, Mancala, Cultural memory, Lonar, Regional gaming traditions

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Introduction

Games etched on horizontal surfaces at historical sites — graffiti games — are a relatively underexplored aspect of archaeological research in India. The current study seeks to fill this gap by systematically documenting such games across sites in Maharashtra. The primary objective is not only to catalogue the boards but also to analyze their design, distribution, and cultural context to shed light on their historical significance. In particular, mancala-type boards, which have been identified in several temple and cave sites, are of special interest due to their known historical spread across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. This study is also informed by conversations with leading game studies scholars like Prof. Alex de Voogt and Dr. Jacob Schmidt Madsen, whose insights helped shape the framework for interpreting these findings. The open-ended nature of the inquiry—whether these newly documented boards represent known games or entirely new ones—adds to the intellectual intrigue of this research.

Site Report & Preliminary Observations

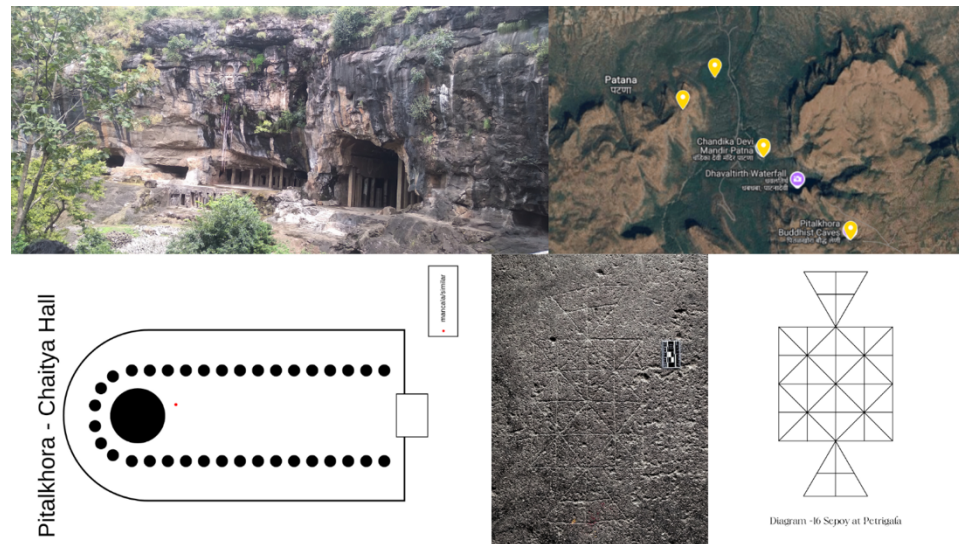


Figure 1 Pitalkhora

1) Pitalkhora Caves: Identified as Ptolemy's *Petrigala* and as *Pitangalya* in the buddhist chronicle *Mahamayuri*, the caves of *Pitalkhora*, along with *Ajanta*, are located on the trade route leading to *Ujjayini* in the north and Shurparaka in the west, dating back to the 2nd century B.C.E. (Government of Maharashtra, 1962; Maharashtra State Gazetteers, 1976)

A solitary etched game board was found in the main *caitya* hall, just a few steps from the *stupa* — a 16-sepoy board, as shown in Fig.1. The board is etched into the floor in shallow incisions.

The team carefully examined every possible horizontal surface across the 14 caves. Although most surfaces appeared suitable for preserving etched figures, no other etchings were found.

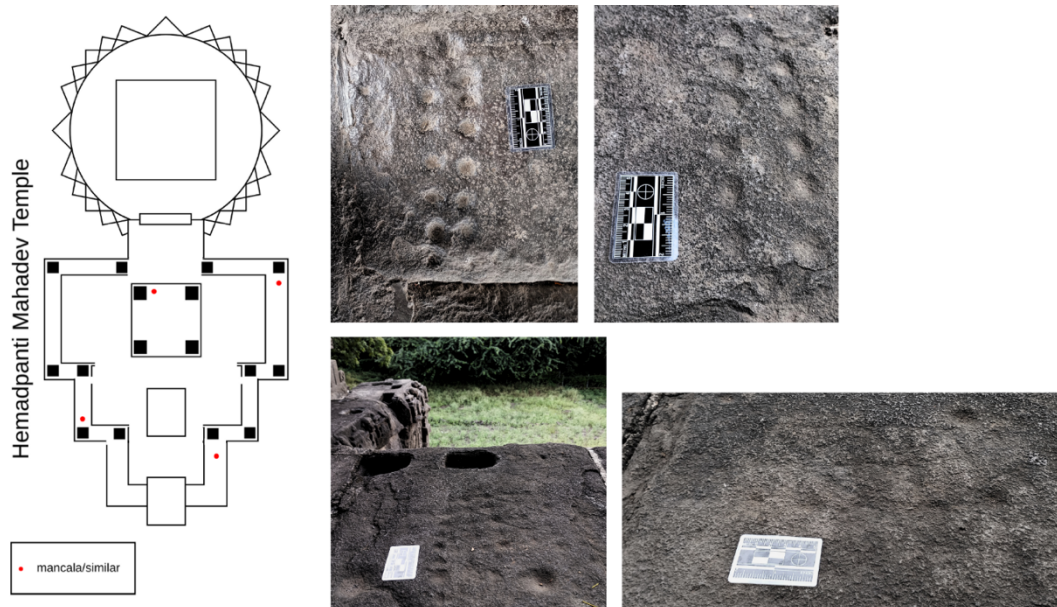


Figure 2 Hemadpanti Mahadev Temple

2) Chalukya Temple: A *Hemadpanthi* - style temple located in the low-lying regions, in contrast to the *Pitalkhora* caves, can be reached by travelling approximately 28 km via the *Gautala* Ghat from the caves. The temple stands in a small clearing, which is accessed from the main road by a narrow walkway of about 20+ metres leading to the site.

The temple has yielded more familiar mancala boards, showing a 6x2 configuration with two faintly visible collection cups at either end. In comparison, the 3rd board shown above is more weathered and shows the

superimposition of a *Morris*-type board over the cupules. Another game board observed at the location was a fairly weathered 16-sepoys board. The mancala board located in the *mandapa* is engraved in the floor, while all the other etchings are located on the parapet.

3) Lonar Crater Temples: Perhaps the most intriguing discovery comes from the *Lonar* Crater Temples, where a previously undocumented board was found. This board resembles a mancala layout but with a third arm radiating from a central pair of depressions/ pits, creating a “T” shaped pattern. No known parallels exist within *Maharashtra* or even wider India, making this find especially significant.

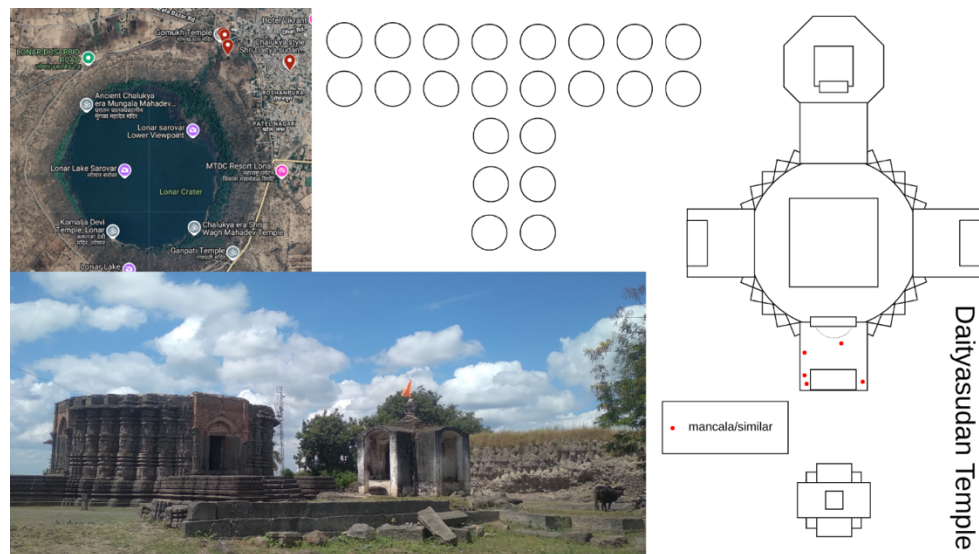


Figure 3 Daityasudan Temple



Figure 4 “New” Game Boards from Daityasudan Temple

3.a.) Daitya Sudan Temple: Located 600 metres from the *Lonar* Lake gate, in the village of *Roshanpura*, the temple features a unique interior design with a *Hemadpanti* - style exterior adorned with amorous figures. The temple is originally believed to be a *Vaiṣṇavite* temple, with a large *Surya* sculpture in the sanctum as its primary deity (Government of Maharashtra, 1962; Maharashtra State Gazetteers, 1976; Cousens, 1897, pp. 77–79). This was the first location explored by the team at *Lonar*, with no initial intention of finding games; the boards discovered here were chance findings.

The team observed a configuration of mancala-type board not previously recorded, at least within the state of *Maharashtra*, based on prior explorations, earliest of which dates back to 2020.

An additional pair of “arm” can be seen radiating perpendicularly from the centre of the typical two rows of a mancala-type board, creating a “T” shape. While the majority of boards show an $8 \times 2 + 3 \times 2$ configuration, one board has a $6 \times 2 + 3 \times 2$ layout and the last one (reverse L shaped), is incomplete. All the boards identified at this temple are located on the front plinth outside the main entrance, as shown in the floor plan above.

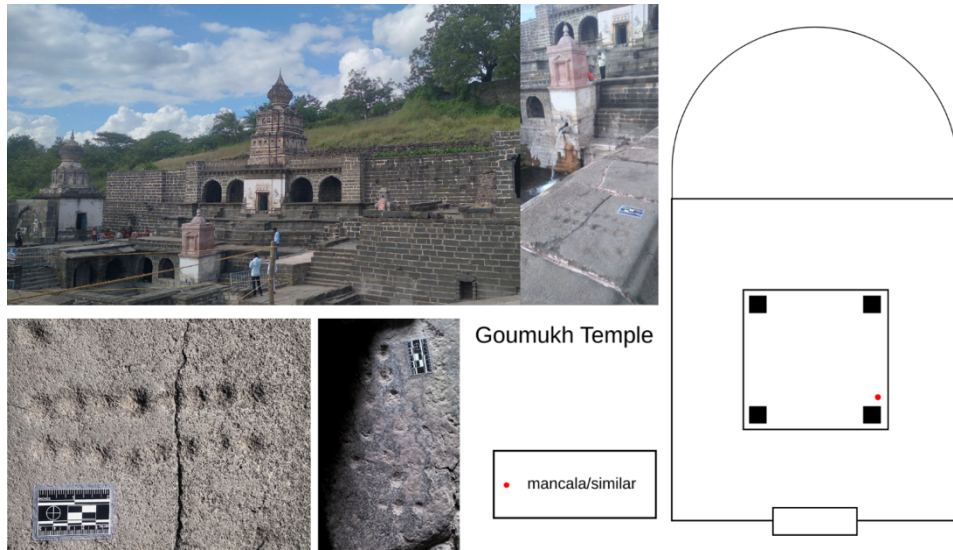


Figure 5 Brahma Kund stepwell and Śaivite Temple



Figure 6 Paphreshwar Temple

3.b) Brahma Kund stepwell and Śaivite Temple: Further explorations of a few temples located around the periphery of *Lonar* Lake, near the lake entrance, led to additional discoveries. Once again, a large number of mancala boards were observed.

A simple 8x2 board was identified on the parapet of the *Brahma Kund*, outside the *Gomukh* temple. A second board was found on a raised *mandapa* inside a small *Śaivite* shrine adjacent to the *Gomukh* temple. This board also displayed the “T”-shaped layout; however, this time it featured a 7x2 + 3x2 configuration.

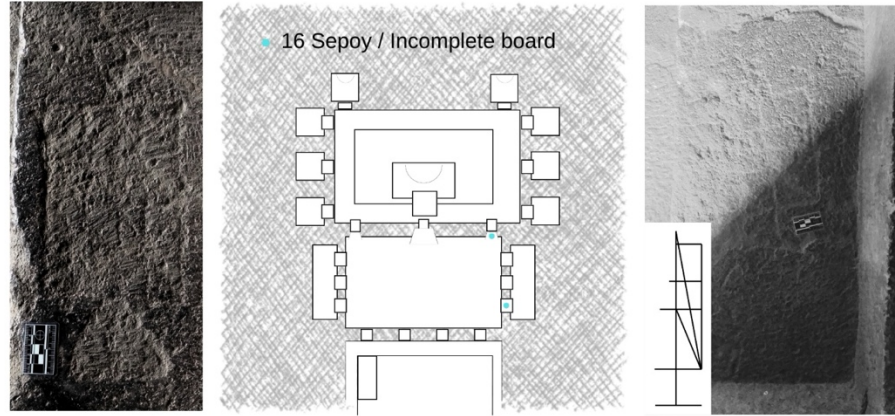
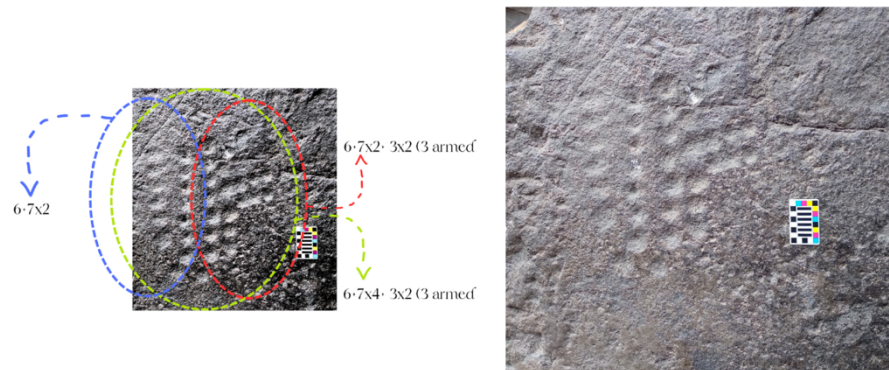
3.c) Paphareshwar Temple: Several small shrines beyond the *Gomukh* temple, another *Saivaite* temple named *Paphareshwar* temple with a single sanctum and an external *nandi mandapa*, situated next to a smaller stepwell.

The boards identified here are mostly of common configurations, except for one “T”-shaped board. This board clearly shows an 8x2 layout, but the third arm appears crude, suggesting it may have been an afterthought or an act of vandalism. A single, almost worn *Nine Men’s Morris* board was also identified in the area outside the sanctum.

4) Aurangabad Caves: A recent visit brought to light new game boards not previously recorded. As mentioned in the initial publication, the caves at *Aurangabad* appear to have emerged through patronage from the laity (Brancaccio, n.d.) and are not directly located on a major trade route. As reported earlier, the majority of boards found at this site are of the mancala type, with regular configurations ranging from 5x2, 6x2, and 7x2 (Gawli and Raghavan, 2021).

During the recent visit, the team observed two new etchings not documented previously. One of these etchings is a board of 16 *sepoys* that has been scribbled into. The other board appears to be a *Tiger and Goats* board, which was etched incorrectly and abandoned during the process, as shown in the accompanying diagram.

Aurangabad Caves - Cave no. 20

**Figure 7** Cave 20 - Aurangabad Caves**Figure 8** Revisiting Ajanta

5) Revisiting Ajanta: During a recent revision of the previously collected data, it was observed that a board resembling the "T"-shaped configuration had, in fact, already been documented during earlier fieldwork in 2021. This board had been included in the dataset but had not been clearly recognised as part of this emerging pattern as the board here was a solitary example at the time. The finding was later presented at the *Board Games Studies Colloquium* in 2023 (Gawli and Raghavan, 2023). The rediscovery of this earlier example, alongside the newly recorded "T"-shaped boards during the current phase of exploration, further reinforces the significance and regional distinctiveness of this particular board configuration in the sites studied so far.

Distribution Analysis

From the above observations and examples, it is evident that the geographic distribution of mancala boards across *Maharashtra* reveals an interesting pattern. While the game appears to be widespread, it is especially concentrated in the central to eastern regions, with a noticeable decline in frequency along the western coastal belt.

This is paradoxical, given the western coast's strong trade connections with African and Arabian regions, and the presence of the *Siddhis* — communities of African descent known to have introduced mancala-like games in other parts of the world. This anomaly raises important questions about the cultural transmission of games and the internal dynamics that may have influenced their regional popularity.

The central regions not only show a higher density of boards but also greater variation in their configurations. This suggests that the game may have evolved locally or that multiple variants coexisted in these areas. These patterns point to the existence of a robust regional gaming culture, which has left durable traces in the form of etched graffiti.

Interpretation and Ethnoarchaeological Insights: Cultural and Historical Implications

As has been discussed many times about graffiti games, their placement within the structures they are part of shows that gaming was not a marginal activity but possibly an important part of temple, trade, or social life. The fact that these boards were etched into permanent architectural features suggests they held ritual or communal meaning. Despite a strong

archaeological presence, living traditions of games like mancala are largely absent in most parts of *Maharashtra* today. This suggests a form of cultural memory loss, where the physical artefacts—etched boards—have outlasted the actual gaming practices they once supported.

Experts such as Prof. Alex de Voogt and Dr. Jacob Schmidt-Madsen has speculated that the newly discovered “T”-shaped board at *Lonar* may represent a regional variation of mancala or perhaps an entirely new game that developed from similar gameplay mechanics (private communication). This hypothesis underscores the need for interdisciplinary approaches that combine archaeology, ethnography, and game studies to better interpret these finds.

The variety of board styles—especially mancala boards found in central *Maharashtra*—supports the idea of a distinct local tradition. This tradition may have been influenced by interactions with other regions, religious institutions, or changing social customs. The board found at *Lonar*, in particular, raises broader questions about creativity, adaptation, and regional identity in gaming traditions. It challenges existing classifications and encourages a rethinking of what defines a “mancala” game.

Open Questions and Future Directions

The findings from this study leave us with more questions than a distinct conclusion. Where did these games originate, and how did they spread across such a varied landscape? Why did they disappear in some areas while evolving in others? Was the “T” shaped board at *Lonar* a mancala variant, or does it represent an entirely new game? Who were the users of these boards, and what social functions did the games serve?

These open-ended inquiries point to the urgent need for further surveys. An ethnoarchaeological survey focusing on local communities’ knowledge and traditions could provide valuable insights. Ultimately, this research underscores the value of games not just as entertainment but as cultural artifacts that reflect broader historical processes.

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