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CATACOMB GAMES: REUSED GAME BOARDS OR FUNERARY INSCRIPTIONS?

Ulrich Schädler
Swiss Museum of Games/ERC Locus Ludi
schaedler.u@bluewin.ch

Abstract. Several marble slabs fashioned like game boards for *XII scripta/Alea* come from Christian catacombs in Rome. Often deliberately cut or fragmented, they were used as funeral slabs. The general opinion is that these game boards have found a secondary use in the funeral context. The present paper presents a critical discussion of this interpretation. The slabs differ in several details from real game boards. Moreover, the inscriptions often betray a distinctive funeral character. Game boards for this game consist of three rows of two groups of six squares, their structure thus being identical to the poetic form of a hexagram. It appears that in Late Antiquity, the hexagram was particularly popular as a formula for funerary inscriptions. Moreover, the symbolic meaning of the *XII scripta/Alea* game favoured its use in sepulchral contexts. It seems therefore that at least a certain number, if not most of these "game" boards, were produced as funeral slabs and never used before as game boards in the home of the living.

XII Scripta, Alea, Catacombs, Games, Circus, Christian, Funeral, Inscriptions, Reuse

Περίληψη. Αρκετοί μαρμάρινοι λίθοι διαμορφωμένοι ως πίνακες παιχνιδιού για το *παιχνίδι των δώδεκα γραμμάτων/του κύβου* (*XII scripta/Alea)* προέρχονται από τις χριστιανικές κατακόμβες της Ρώμης. Συχνά σκόπιμα θραυσμένες ή αποσπασματικές χρησιμοποιήθηκαν ως επιτύμβιες στήλες. Η γενική άποψη είναι ότι αυτοί οι πίνακες παιχνιδιού βρέθηκαν σε ταφικά σύνολα σε δεύτερη χρήση. Το παρόν άρθρο

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παρουσιάζει μια κριτική συζήτηση αυτής της ερμηνείας. Οι λίθοι διαφέρουν σε αρκετές λεπτομέρειες από τις πραγματικές τράπεζες παιχνιδιών. Επιπλέον, οι επιγραφές συχνά προδίδουν έναν ιδιαίτερο ταφικό χαρακτήρα. Οι τράπεζες παιχνιδιού για το συγκεκριμένο παιχνίδι αποτελούνται από τρεις σειρές δύο ομάδων των έξι τετραγώνων, καθιστώντας έτσι την δομή τους πανομοιότυπη με την ποιητική μορφή ενός εξαμέτρου. Είναι εμφανές ότι στην Ύστερη Αρχαιότητα η στερεοτυπική χρήση του εξάμετρου ήταν ιδιαιτέρως δημοφιλής για επιτύμβιες επιγραφές. Επιπροσθέτως, η συμβολική σημασία του παιχνιδιού των *δώδεκα γραμμάτων/του κύβου* ευνοούσε την χρήση του σε ταφικά πλαίσια. Φαίνεται επομένως ότι τουλάχιστον ένας ορισμένος αριθμός, αν όχι οι περισσότερες από αυτές τις τράπεζες «παιχνιδιού», κατασκευάστηκαν ως επιτύμβιες στήλες και δεν χρησιμοποιήθηκαν ποτέ ως τράπεζες παιχνιδιού στα πλαίσια του οίκου των ζωντανών.

Δώδεκα γράμματα (XII Scripta), κύβος (Alea), κατακόμβες, παιχνίδια, ιππόδρομος, χριστιανικός, επιτύμβιος, επιγραφές, δεύτερη χρήση

Riassunto. Numerose lastre di marmo in forma di tavole da gioco per il *XII scripta/Alea* provengono dalle catacombe cristiane di Roma. Spesso frammenti di tavole o esemplari deliberatamente tagliati sono stati impiegate come lastre funerarie. È opinione diffusa che l'uso di queste lastre di marmo in contesto funerario sia secondario. L'articolo propone una discussione critica di questa interpretazione. Le lastre differiscono in diversi dettagli dalle vere tavole da gioco. Inoltre, le iscrizioni spesso tradiscono un precipuo carattere funerario. Le tavole destinate a questo gioco consistono di tre file di due gruppi di sei quadrati; la loro struttura è quindi identica alla forma poetica di un esagramma. Risulta che l'esagramma fosse particolarmente popolare nella tarda antichità come formula per le iscrizioni funerarie. Inoltre, il significato simbolico del gioco del *XII scripta/Alea* favorì il suo utilizzo in contesti sepolcrali. Si conclude, quindi, che almeno un certo numero di queste tavole "da gioco", se non la maggior parte, siano state prodotte come lastre funerarie e non siano mai state utilizzate prima come tavole da gioco nella casa dei vivi.

XII scripta, *alea*, giochi, catacombe, circo, cristiano, funerale, iscrizioni, reimpiego

Introduction

Numerous marble slabs inscribed in the shape of a game board for *XII scripta/Alea* – and only *XII scripta/Alea*! – are attested in Christian catacombs in Rome. Often deliberately cut or fragmented, they were used as funeral slabs.[1]

The general opinion is that these game boards have found a secondary use in the funeral context. For example, in his *La Roma sotterranea Cristiana*, Giovanni Battista de Rossi repeatedly used the formula of a "*tavola lusoria*" "*tagliata*", "*segata*", or "*adoperata*" "*per chiudere un loculo*",[2] thus indicating that these boards were cut in order to close a burial niche. Max Ihm,[3] who first produced a catalogue of those game boards, wrote: "*In den christlichen Begräbnisstätten Roms sind Bruchstücke von Spieltafeln häufig zum Verschluss der loculi benutzt worden*". Antonio Ferrua was convinced:

> che si tratti semplicemente di tavolieri posseduti e usati da antichi cristiani, e poi in mancanza di meglio adoperati a chiudere le bocche dei loro sepolcri nelle catacombe, come una lastra marmorea qualsiasi[4]

He dismissed theories of these boards having an ornamental or symbolical value or a distinctive function but argued in favour of a purely pragmatic reason for their employment as gravestones.[5] This view is also shared by Anita Rieche,[6] and Nicholas Purcell speaks of a "catacomb reuse phenomenon".[7] Recently, Raffaella Giuliani described the presumed reuse of these game boards as follows:

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[2] DE ROSSI 1877, 170, 374, 376, 383, 391, passim.

[3] IHM 1890, 223-239, in part. 228; completed in IHM 1891, 208-220.

[4] FERRUA 1948, 56.

[5] FERRUA 1947b, 495-499.

[6] RIECHE 2007, 88.

[7] PURCELL 2007, 93-94.

> dovevano essere appartenuti in vita ai proprietari delle tombe in cui furono impiegati, tavole da gioco che si trovavano nelle case, in tutte le case, e che tornavano estremamente utili – per dimensioni, forma e materiale – quando il proprietario passava a miglior vita, e i suoi cari si trovavano nella necessità di provvedere ai bisogni della tomba.[8]

In a short article published in *Archéothéma* in 2013, I raised some doubts about this interpretation.[9] The purpose of this paper is to further corroborate my view that at least a certain number, if not most of these "game" boards, were produced as funeral slabs and never used before as game boards in the home of the living.

The game boards found in Christian catacombs[10] have three rows of 12 squares, every row arranged in two groups of six squares by a dividing symbol in the middle, so as to form what in modern backgammon is called the "bar" (Fig. 1). In his *Etymologies* (or *Origines*), Isidore of Seville († April 4, 636) gives a fairly detailed description of this type of game board. He states that the players:

> argue that these rows are divided into six places because of the human ages and in three lines because of the tenses. And therefore, they say that the board is arranged in three lines
>
> […] sed et ipsas vias senariis locis distinctas propter aetates hominum ternariis lineis propter tempora argumentantur. Inde et tabulam ternis discriptam dicunt lineis[11]

The squares of these boards can be fashioned in the shape of squares, circles, strokes, symbols (leaves, double peltas, etc.) or letters, which often make up a hexagram, i.e., a sentence consisting of six six-letter words. Isidore calls this game *Alea*, but a general overview of this type of game

[8] GIULIANI 2013, 235.

[9] SCHÄDLER 2013, 68. DASEN 2020, took up this idea. See also SCHÄDLER 2012, 22-23.

[10] See already BRUZZA 1877, 81-99, esp. 82-83. Already de' FICORONI 1734, 121, 122, 125-26, referred Isidore's description to this type of boards. For *ludus latrunculorum* boards in pagan funerary contexts, see DASEN–MATHIEU 2021.

[11] Isid., *Etym.*, 18.64.



Figure 1: *XII Scripta/Alea* marble gaming table, from Ephesus, Alytarchos Stoa. Selçuk Museum (photograph U. Schädler).

board and the game related to it reveals that the board was identical to the one used for the *Ludus duodecim scriptorum*.[12] Carefully executed marble gaming tables, of in some cases monumental size, dating to the 3rd to 6th centuries AD have been found in Aphrodisias, Ephesus, Sagalassos, Kibyra, Laodiceia ad Lycum, Perge, Kos, Halicarnassus[13] and elsewhere.[14] Often,

[12] SCHÄDLER 1995, 73-98. Peter Talloen's recent suggestion (TALLOEN 2018, 104 and 115) to distinguish between earlier inscribed boards for *XII scripta* and later abstract boards for *Alea* contradicts the archaeological record and is not convincing.

[13] I have to thank Klaus Hallof and Signe Isager for pointing to me the unpublished finds from Halicarnassus and Kos, both with Greek inscriptions in the squares. The text of the Halicarnassus board (inv. n. of the Bodrum Museum: 6567), of which only the left part is preserved, reads "ΤΑΒΛΙΝ [……] / ΦΕΙΛΩΝ [……] / [.]ΟΝΟC [……]". The inscription will be published in the Corpus of Inscriptions from Halikarnassos, to be edited by Jan-Mathieu Carbon, Signe Isager and Poul Pedersen, which is under preparation.

[14] For Aphrodisias: ROUECHÉ 2004 (http://insaph.kcl.ac.uk/ala2004), n. 68, 69, 70,71, 238; ROUECHÉ 2007, 101; for Ephesus: SCHÄDLER 2019, 86-87; MERKELBACH 1978, 48-50 (the gaming table in question is NOT for the *ludus latrunculorum* but for *XII* scripta/Alea); for Sagalassos: TALLOEN 2018, 102-121; for Kibyra: DEMIRER 2015, 74-82;

they were put up in public places or buildings, and even dedicated by officials of the city. Some inscriptions on game boards contain prayers to God or Jesus, such as the Gruterus board,[15] a fragmented board from San Sebastiano,[16] the board from Çarşamba and a *XII scripta/Alea* board from Ghawr es-Safi (Jordan).[17] A board, found in the catacombs of SS Marcellino e Pietro, which says *"[te]mpus laetum / [pa]sto[r] cantat / […… ……]"*, features biblical scenes in the dividing symbols.[18] These archaeological finds as well as several references in official church documents and other literary sources such as the Latin Anthology testify to the appreciation and popularity of the game, even in Christian times,[19] a point we have to keep in mind.

One reason to question the view that these boards were originally used as game boards in the homes of Pagan or Christian families is a practical argument. Depictions of board game players as on the Etruscan bronze mirror in Milan, on the wall-painting in Salvius' *caupona* in Pompeii,[20] on the *Xenia* mosaic from El-Djem, or on the Horses' mosaic in Carthage, show that the players, while sitting on chairs or stools facing each other, used to keep the game board on their knees, a custom that can still be observed today in various parts of the world.[21] These game boards were certainly made of wood and a few examples, fragments or traces of such wooden

for Perge: MANSEL 1967, 102, 106 fig. 5; for Çarşamba: WAELKENS *et alii* 1993, 107 n. 330; for Laodiceia: ŞIMŞEK 2014, 48-50 fig. 20.

[15] CIG IV, 409 n. 8983. GONCALVES 2014, consulted January 31, 2015. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/mefra/2643; DOI: 10.4000/mefra.2643.

[16] FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, 153 n. 122.

[17] POLITIS 2019, fig. 21.1a, 21.1b.

[18] Giuliani 2013 with reference to FERRUA 1968, 57-59 fig. 25, 65-66 fig. 30, and FERRUA 1970, 92-93 fig. 2,4.

[19] For the increasing acceptance of the game by the church in Late Antiquity, see ZIEGLER 2018, 162-164.

[20] VI.14,35/36; MNN inv. 111482.

[21] Pompeii: PRESUHN 1892, Abtheilung V, pl. V and VI; PRESUHN 1878, unnumbered table; RITTER 2011, 155-200, pl. 7, 1. 3; SCHÄDLER 2013, 39; El Djem: CHARLES-PICARD 1952, 156-157 pl. 9; DUNBABIN 1978, 260-261 no. 28; YACOUB 1996, 138, 210 fig. 105 (Inv. 3197); BALMELLE *et alii* 1990, pl. 13 and passim; Carthage: SALOMONSON 1965, 24-25 pl. 58 (1); DARMON 2003, 106–118; See SCHÄDLER 2016, 520. Two players have a game board with a dice tower on their knees on a magical gem dating to 2nd century AD: DASEN 2020b.

boards, have come down to us.[22] However, marble game boards like those from the catacombs are certainly not appropriate for this. Firstly, simply because they weigh too much. The more complete boards in Ferrua's catalogue, of which also the thickness is indicated, usually measure ca. 30-80 cm by 50-110 cm by 2-3 cm. If one applies the specific weight of Carrara marble of 2'700 kg/m3, the average weight of such boards lies between 20 and 50 kg! Secondly, the marble boards lack the raised rim that not only wooden boards such as the game board from Qustul or the boards from Vimose have, but also marble gaming tables for *XII scripta/Alea* such as those mentioned above from cities of Asia Minor,[23] which prevents the dice from falling off the board. The ergonomic characteristics of the catacomb marble boards – the weight and the absence of a raised rim – alone nourish doubts about their supposed primary function as game boards.

Designs and inscriptions

Let us now turn to the design of these boards. The first evident case, of which, however, a funerary context is not attested, is a board found on the Quirinal hill in Rome, whose inscription expresses the wish "that Sabbati(u)s may win" (Fig. 2).[24] The words are arranged in a similar way as the hexagrams of the game boards. The first and upper line has, on the left of a circle as a dividing symbol, "*SAB*", and on the right side "*BIN*". The second line reads "*BATIC*" and, separated by an "×", "*CAS*", giving the acclamation "*Sabbatie vincas*", while the third and lower line of the board is decorated by one long palm branch as a symbol of victory. The difference to the game boards is threefold: firstly, the words do not read horizontally (one would expect *Sab* ○ *batis* / *bin* × *cas* or *Sabbatis* ○ *bincas*), secondly, the number of letters does not correspond to the required number of cells, and finally the palm branch is not divided into two parts. However, the dividing symbols of the upper and the central row are typical for the *XII scripta/Alea*-boards and therefore clearly show the reference to this type of game. The

[22] See e.g. Stanway: SCHÄDLER 2007. For Qustul: EMERY – KIRWAN 1938, 345-346. fig. 111, pl. 87; EMERY 1948, 46 pl. 8 and 32a. For Vimose: ENGELHARDT 1869, 11-12 pl. 3, 9-11. For a general discussion see SCHÄDLER, forthcoming.

[23] See ROUECHÉ 2004, SCHÄDLER 1995. Perge: MANSEL 1967, 102, 106 fig. 5. SAGALASSOS: TALLOEN 2018.

[24] IHM 1891, 218; FERRUA 1946, 60-63; FERRUA 1948, pl. 1.2; FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, 123 n. 94. The name Sabbatius is also mentioned on another slab (FERRUA 1948, pl. 1.3; FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, 124 n. 95).

familiar hexagram structure of the *XII scripta/Alea* boards was used to design the acclamation. The spectators in the circus used to welcome and encourage the charioteers with acclamations like this. Considering that *XII scripta/Alea* was a race game, it may be relevant to note that Dionysius Areopagita (6th century AD) uses the metaphor of a race and struggle for victory in Christian terms as a symbol of the efforts of his fellow Christians to gain eternal life in heaven: he speaks of a "goal of divine contests" (τέλος



Figure 2: Marble slab with inscription "Sabbatis bincas" (drawing after FERRUA 1948, pl. I.2).

ἱερῶν ἀγώνων), "the goal of their most divine course" (πέρας θειοτάτῶν δρόμων), of "the goal crowned with victory" (τὸ νικηφόρον τέλος) and even of "the bequest of holy wreaths of victory" (στεφάνων ἱερῶν).[25]

Dionysius is neither the first nor the only one to use such agonistic metaphors.[26] The apostle Paul and, following him, John Chrysostom (4th century AD) also drew on the image of athletic competition and spectacle.[27] Talking to his Greek audience about baptism, Chrysostom speaks of life before baptism as a period of training and exercise (παλαίστρα καὶ γυμνάσιον), while from the day of baptism on it would become an agon (ἀγὼν) and wrestling (παλαίσματα) in the stadium (στάδιον) under the eyes of spectators seated above (θέατρον ἄνω κάθηται). Recently, Lynda Coon

[25] Dion. Areopagita, *De eccl. hier.*, 7.1 § 1 and 3.
[26] See recently PUK 2014, 45-48 with bibl. references in note 149.
[27] See JONES 2011, 321-338, esp. 322, with reference to WENGER 1970, 155.

and Kim Sexton have convincingly argued that the importance in Christian theology of the circus as an image for the kinship of Christian martyrs and charioteers even found an architectural expression through the so-called "circus basilicas", constructed since the mid-4th century within the cities of the dead.[28] By the time that the game boards were in use in the catacombs, this rhetoric of Christ's athletes striving for victory in a public competition was an established concept.[29] I would suggest therefore that the acclamation "[…] *vincas*", commonly used to encourage the *aurigae* or *venatores* in the circus, may have been used here in Christian terms to congratulate the deceased Sabbatius, who already achieved what the others were aiming at. Of course, it is tempting to assume that the Sabbatius of the game board is identical with the *venator* Sabatius on the gladiator mosaic from Torrenova in the Galleria Borghese.[30] Be that as it may, one further aspect might be worth mentioning here: As Laurence H. Kant has argued, the name Sabatius or Sabbatis, of Jewish origin, seems in some cases to indicate Christians[31], which is very likely true for the Sabatius of the game board.

The circus is alluded to in several game boards from the catacombs and elsewhere, with formulas such as "*CIRCVS PLENVS / CLAMOR MAGNVS*" in some cases followed by the usual acclamation "*[…] vincas*" or " *[…] vinces*".[32] The common opinion is that this reference to the circus is meant as a comparison of the chariot races with the race game type of the game,[33] an idea that might find a certain support in the representation of *XII scripta/Alea*-players in the background of one of the panels of the Horses' mosaic in Carthage. However, it is not unlikely that the allusions to the circus in the game board inscriptions, positive as they are, have a Christian background and meaning, as in the case of Sabbatius. Richard DeVoe has shown that, in contrast to the condemnation of the circus and the chariot races in the writings from Tertullian and other earlier Christian and patristic

[28] COON – SEXTON 2020.

[29] JONES 2011, 335.

[30] The extensive literature is summarized by Giulia Ciccarello, in an article entitled "Mosaico pavimentale con gladiatori e cacciatori": https://galleriaborghese.beniculturali.it/opere/mosaico-pavimentale-con-gladiatori-e-cacciatori/ (retrieved August 17, 2021).

[31] KANT 1987, 706-707; RINALDI 2009, 131 n. 207.

[32] See FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, 111-122 n. 83-93. On the circus races in general, see recently BELL 2020 with bibliography.

[33] RIECHE 2007, 88.

authors, by the late 4th century, Christians attended the games in increasing numbers, supported and perpetuated them. When, after the 4th century, the original religious aspects of the games had taken a back seat, the circus races flourished even when Rome was already Christian, especially in the major cities.[34] In Imperial times, the audience in the circus represented Roman society and in Late Antiquity several authors, even Christians, describe the circus as an image of the world.[35] It is not impossible to assume that in the Christian logic of life, death and resurrection, the spectacle Paul had alluded to (1 Cor. 4:9), could best be imagined as the "*circus plenus*" and understood as the spectacle uniting the Christian community, the living as well as the angels.[36] And with "*clamor magnus*", "*ingens*" or "*mirus*", the community encouraged and applauded as "*victors*" those who had reached the goal of "the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" as Paul put it (3 Phil. 14). The circus inscriptions on the "game" boards from Christian funeral contexts may therefore find a better explanation in their religious significance, than in the comparison of board game and chariot races, the more so if we assume that the boards were not produced as real game boards used at home, but as objects intended for a sepulchral function.

Another slab comes from the cemetery of Ciriaca at San Lorenzo and is now kept in the Museo Lateranense (inv. 32977, Fig. 3).[37] The inscription consists of a few letters disposed in three lines at the left and right of three dividing symbols typical for *XII scripta/Alea* boards. It reads:

[F?]LES (semi circle) EI
ETCI (circle with 6-petaled rosette) TO
VICI (semi circle with leaf) TE

This gives for the two lower lines *et cito vici te* ("and quickly I beat you"), while the first word in the upper line might read *fles* ("you cry") according

[34] DEVOE 2002, 16. PUK 2014, 161-228. Circus races became a metaphor of competitive spirit even for children, as depictions of children or cupids performing races (with wheels or with chariots) on sarcophagi and mosaics attest. But it is outside the scope of this article to trace in detail the popularity of the circus races and its importance in Late Antiquity. For sarcophagi, see SCHAUENBURG 1995 and HUTCHINSON 1996, 16-20, 89.

[35] FRIEDLÄNDER 1920, note 40: Tert., *De spect.*, 9, Goripp., *In laud. Iust.*, 1.314 sqq.; Cassiod., *Var.*, 3.52; Lydus, *Mens.*, 4.30; *Anth. Lat.*, 197R.

[36] WENGER 1970, 155.

[37] ICUR 19350. FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, 48 n. 24; for a photograph, see MARUCCHI 1910, 65 and pl. LXXII.12.



Figure 3: Marble slab with inscription "*Et cito vici te*", from S. Lorenzo. Musei Vaticani (photograph Musei Vaticani).

to Luigi Bruzza.[38] While for Bruzza the board measuring 29.5 × 46 cm is complete, Ferrua was of the opinion that the board as preserved is fragmented and that circles or palmettes indicated the missing letters to make a complete game board of three rows with twice six squares. However, if a complete game board was intended, one might have expected to read *ETCITO* (circle) *VICITE*, since the number of letters in each row is six. This is why Bruzza concluded that it is a "*tavola intera ma secondo un diverso sistema*". It seems to me that we have in fact to do with a complete inscription designed around the dividing symbols of a game board, in order to make the reference to the *XII scripta/Alea* boards evident.

Let us consider a further fragment, found in the catacombs of S. Callisto (Fig. 4).[39] The upper edge seems to preserve the original edge of the slab. Below, the inscription reads "*[---]DALE* (half circle) *DULC[is]*". G.B. de

[38] FERRUA 1948, 39 n. 100; L. Bruzza, ms. Lett. III, 28, indicated by Busia (FERRUA - BUSIA 2001).

[39] DE ROSSI 1877, 331; FERRUA 1964, 27-28 n. 171 fig. 7m; FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, 177 n. 144.

Rossi completed the obviously female name at the left to "Pardale", while Ferrua read "Dedale", which would make a six-letter word. The half circle,



Figure 4: Marble slab with inscription "[Dae]dale dulcis", from S. Callisto, cubicolo As, ad papas (after FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, p. 177 n. 144).

here in a particularly elaborate form ending in spirals, is a typical dividing symbol of one of the outer rows of squares of *XII scripta/Alea*-boards.[40] So the fragment would preserve part of the upper row of such a game board.

De Rossi seems to have considered this fragment part of a funerary inscription. Maria Busia goes a step further stating that de Rossi "*la crede epitaffio funebre, che sia epitaffio a mo' di tavola lusoria*", i.e., an inscription in the shape of a game board, although de Rossi did not say anything of the kind. In his 1964 article, Ferrua discussed the fragment in more detail. He argued, from traces of mortar at the left edge, that the slab was used in this fragmentary state to close the *loculus* of a child. This implies that the slab had had a primary use before. But which one?

A short search in the epigraphic database Clauss/Slaby (EDCS) results in hundreds of instances of *dulcis*, in particular within the *tituli sepulcrales.*[41] In the form of "name *dulcis*" or "name *dulcis in pace*", sometimes with "anima" added, the formula is used equally for men and women, children and adults. "*Victoria / [du]lcis / in pace*",[42] "*Iovinu[s] / dulcis in pace*",[43]

[40] Comp. FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, 154 n. 123.

[41] http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epi_ergebnis.php. Accessed September 6th, 2019. From Rome come 501 inscriptions, 464 of which tituli sepulcrales.

[42] EDCS-44100031.

[43] EDCS-63600365.

"*Bonifatia du/lcis in pace*",[44] "*Faustina / dulcis in pace*"[45] from Northern Africa, or "*Karitine dulcis / in pace*",[46] "*Iuliana / dulcis*",[47] "*Florentia / dulcis*",[48] "*Fulviane anima dulcis*",[49] and "*Leo / anima dulcis*"[50] from Rome stand for many other examples of this formula. Thus, the appearance of the word "dulcis" in an inscription suggests that it is likely to be a funerary inscription. More *tabulae lusoriae* with the word *dulcis* come from the catacombs.[51] One wonders why someone would keep a game board with a funeral inscription on it at home for fun. It is more likely that we are dealing with a fragment of a former funeral inscription, which was designed in the form of a game board.

It is interesting to note that the formula *anima dulcis* also appears on some of the late-antique gold-glass cups.[52] These cups come, as far as the documentation attests, exclusively from funerary contexts, and not a few of them were found in the catacombs in Rome. There, they were often inserted in the still wet plaster sealing of *loculi* at the moment when the grave was closed. Whether or not these cups had a secular use before is a matter of debate. While Steffen Diefenbach argues for a primarily secular and only secondary use in the funerary context, Daniel Th. Howells is more cautious stating that the function of the gold-glasses, which often do not have functional shapes, "need not have been funerary in the first instance".[53] Paul-Albert Février and recently Susan Walker on the contrary believe that the glasses were ordered specifically to be used once during the funeral.[54]

This leads us to question what exactly happened during an early Christian burial. However, the funeral rites in Rome from the 3rd to the 5th century themselves are difficult to establish.[55] The more so since apparently there was no standardized ritual custom applied all over the Roman empire

[44] EDCS-08601578.
[45] EDCS-08601591.
[46] EDCS-03900039.
[47] EDCS-38700533.
[48] EDCS-33101147.
[49] EDCS-39700306.
[50] EDCS-39900384.
[51] FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, cat. n. 136, 146, 147, 186, 187?, 188?.
[52] MOREY 1959, n. 3, 15, 18, 20, 26, 115 ("*anima dulcis*") and n. 48, 90, 109, 310, 426 ("*anima dulcis vivas*" and/or "*pie zeses*").
[53] DIEFENBACH 2007, 47-48; HOWELLS 2015, 60-61, with 101-102 n. 17, 119 n. 33, 124 n. 37, and 143 n. 53.
[54] FÉVRIER 1978, 166, 172; WALKER 2018, 131.
[55] PHILLIPS 2005, 214-15; VOLP 2002.

during the period in question. We will of course not expect Christian authors to recommend playing games during a funeral; they prefer to mention a procession to the grave, prayers, reading in the holy scriptures, and the singing of hymns and psalms. But some sources reveal that the funerals could have been rather cheerful events.[56] We read of people singing and dancing on the graves at Easter.[57] Moreover, funerary banquets, which could include a lot of drinking, were also held,[58] whether they were regarded as *refrigerium* associated with the eucharist or not.[59] P.-A. Février has shown the existence of rooms for banquets in the Roman catacombs, and banquets are frequently represented in wall-paintings near the graves.[60] Undoubtedly, in early Christian times, banquets were part of the funerals and commemorative rituals.

From what has been discussed so far, I am inclined to think that during such funerary banquets, the participants engaged in playing board games. Obviously, *XII Scripta/Alea* was the game preferred, or because of its popularity and appreciation or perhaps because of its symbolic meaning as a metaphor of time (past, present, future) and the ages of human life described by Isidore.[61] In this type of game, the counters come into play at the start of the game, move around the board according to the unpredictable outcome of rolls of dice, and leave the board again at the end, which might have been regarded as an allegory of human life. We must not forget that not only game boards were found in the catacombs, but also other gaming material: Marc'Antonio Boldetti recorded dice and counters that had been inserted, as the gold-glasses, in the wet mortar — obviously after the banquet, when the grave was closed.[62]

[56] Cyprian, *De mort*. 20; Dion. Areopagita, *De eccl. hier*., 8 § 3.
[57] Basil of Caesarea, *Hom*., 14.1.
[58] Paulinus of Nola, *Letter*, 13; Augustinus, *Mor. eccl*., 1.75.
[59] DIEFENBACH 2007, 44-49.
[60] ZIMMERMANN 2012, 171-185; Volp 2002, esp. 198-224.
[61] *Etymologies*, 18, 64.
[62] BOLDETTI 1720, 406 pl. 4 n. 46, 48, 49 (dice), 509 pl. 5 n. 50, 53, 54 (dice); 512-513 pl. 6 n. 68 (counters); DE ROSSI 1877, 585-586.

A slab in the Vatican Museum, also late antique, is particularly interesting:[63] six small circles in line accompany the funeral inscription of a girl named Marciana, who died at the age of only 8 (Fig. 5). There is too much empty space on the left of the circles to think of an incomplete game board. The circles seem rather to have been added, in order to refer to a game board. In this context it may be interesting to remember that Isidore of Seville explains in his *Etymologies* that on game boards for *Alea*, the division of the squares into six groups symbolized the six ages of human life, i.e. i*nfantia, pueritia, adolescentia, iuventus, adultus* and *senectus*.[64] The one group of six circles on the board would thus correspond to childhood, the first age of life, which Marciana had barely achieved. The board would therefore not simply have remained incomplete, but the girl's parents may have wanted to add one more piece of information to the funeral inscription by referring to the symbolism of the game of *Alea*. In a similar way, the parents of little boy Quiriacus, who lived only 1 year 6 months and 14 days during the second half of the 4th century, added six ×s in a straight line beneath his funerary inscription.[65]



Figure 5: Marble slab with inscription for Marciane. Musei Vaticani, Galleria Lapidaria (photograph U. Schädler).

A slab consisting of several fragments closes a burial niche in the catacombs of SS. Marcellino e Pietro. It still retains two lines of a hexagram: "*CAPTVS* (semi-circle) *[CL]AMAT / AVCVPS* (cantharus) *CAPTAT*" – "the captured weeps, the fowler makes a catch".[66] According to A. Ferrua, the upper edge seems to be the original edge of the slab, while the lower edge supposedly bearing the third row of squares has been cut off, so that only two rows remained (measurements 19 × 69.5 cm). Between these two lines

[63] FERRUA 1948, 57, n. 131, pl. IV n. 14.
[64] See above, note 61.
[65] MARUCCHI 1910, pl. LXXII, 50 and 66; ICUR VII, 18637.
[66] FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, 106 n. 79.

the funeral inscription "*Luxuri[ae or o][i]n pacae*" (Luxuria or Luxurius rest in peace) has been inscribed by another hand.

Other *tabulae lusoriae* retain the complete hexagram or variants of it with the additional lines: *MERVLA CANTAT* ("the blackbird sings") and *TVRDVS STVPET* ("the thrush is stunned").[67] So, the hexagrams were composed of three out of the four lines *MERVLA CANTAT*, *TVRDVS STVPET*, *AVCEPS CAPTAT*, and *CAPTVS CLAMAT*.[68] The bird the fowler is aiming at is probably the thrush (*turdus*), while the blackbird (*merula*) served as decoy.[69] A. Ferrua argued that this verse would refer to the capture of a pawn and the complaint of the player concerned.[70] However, since the bird in antiquity was regarded as a symbol of the soul of the deceased, the verse that refers to a fowler who captures a bird may more likely refer to death that gathers life suddenly or in an unexpected moment, i.e. to a premature and untimely death, especially of a child. The image of the catching of birds appears also on children's sarcophagi, dating to the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, roughly the same period as the *loculi*, which may corroborate our interpretation.[71] One should also keep in mind that Merula as well as Turdus were proper names, so that these tabulae might even contain a more direct reference to the deceased, whose names unfortunately remain unknown to us. In her study of figurative slabs for loculi, Elisabeth Ehler points out the fact that on some slabs for persons named Leo or Leontia, the image of a lion was added as a direct illustration of the names.[72] On the slab for Luxuria or Luxurius appears a cantharus, which serves as a dividing sign between the groups of six squares or letters of the supposed central row of squares. As dividing symbol for the *XII scripta/Alea*-game, the cantharus is exceptional, but it appears frequently on Christian tomb slabs, especially

[67] FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, 101-109.

[68] A board, found engraved into a seat in the exedra of the Palatine stadium (IHM 1891, 212 n. 54; FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, 105 n. 78; EDCS n. 53300277) probably reads "STVP[et turdus] / CANT[at merula] / CAPP[it auceps]".

[69] See VENDRIES 2009, 123-127. For birds: LUNCZER 2009, 106-108 (blackbird), 109, 110 (Wacholderdrossel, turdus, thrush) (http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/10154/1/Lunczer_Diss_Voegel.pdf); Arnold 2007, 161-62 s.v. Kopsichos, 42 s.v. Brenthos.

[70] FERRUA 1948, 24. FRIEDRICH 2002, 92, follows this opinion.

[71] See VENDRIES 2009, 133-134. For the catching of birds in antiquity, see also LINDNER 1973.

[72] EHLER 2012, 77.

from the 390s through the 5th century.[73] Judging from the cantharus represented between two laurel leaves on a slab from the catacombs of San Callisto with the depiction of two trochus players, it might be understood as a symbol of victory, and more precisely of victory over death.[74] More often, however, the cantharus in early Christian art seems to stand for the *refrigerium*, the ritual meal in honour of the deceased. Anyway, the cantharus reveals that the *tabula lusoria* was designed for funeral use from the beginning.

Conclusion

We discussed a number of marble slabs with inscriptions, the layout of which corresponds to the shape of *XII scripta/Alea* game boards. In Late Antiquity and Early Byzantine times, *Alea* was a highly appreciated game, in fact, it is the only Roman board game for which elaborate marble gaming tables were produced and put up in public spaces and buildings. Several marble slabs of this type were used in Christian funerary contexts, especially in the Roman catacombs. Judging from a practical point of view to begin with, it is questionable that these boards were ever conceived as game boards for play in private homes. Due to their size and weight, marble slabs are very awkward to handle as game boards; at home, the use of wooden boards, although rarely preserved, was certainly the rule. On the wall painting from the Osteria della Via di Mercurio in Pompeii (VI 10, 1.19, room b), such a wooden game board is depicted placed on a small table. And the person who chiselled the board into the surface of a marble table in the slope house 2, app. 7 in Ephesus, had a wooden board with attached bronze handles in mind.[75] It is therefore unlikely that the marble "game boards" from the catacombs were made and used for private play and reused in the catacombs only later.

In several cases, it is evident that the inscriptions do not make a game board but refer to it through certain elements, as for example the layout in three lines or the typical dividing symbols between the words. In other cases, I hope to have demonstrated that the use of certain words, symbols,

[73] Comp. DE ROSSI 1877, pl. 30-31, 2; EHLER 2012, 90. A semicircle on a triangle on a board from the catacomb of S. Lorenzo (FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, 169 n. 137) may perhaps be interpreted as a stylized form of cantharus.

[74] BUCOLO 2013, 140, 145-46; DASEN 2018, 134, fig. 11.

[75] SCHÄDLER 2016, 519-523.

formulas or themes such as the circus and the catching of birds have a decidedly funerary and specific Christian signification.

Moreover, the game itself without any additional inscription obviously could have a meaning for those who used them in the context of the burial of deceased members of the family. Several non-epigraphic "game boards" or boards with the squares marked by letters of the alphabet are attested in the catacombs. Of particular interest is the drawing of a game board incised in an unfortunately fragmented marble slab, showing that the image itself of the game could suffice.[76] Perhaps, they were understood as an allegory for time and human life, as Isidore related around 600 AD.

The slabs had often to be cut in order to fit the required dimensions of the *loculus*. This is due to the fact that the format of the *loculi* was normally more elongated than the usual *XII scripta/Alea* boards. Such clipping also destroyed the game board and detracted it from further use, whether or not this was an accessory intention. But the cuttings, the fractures, and the sometimes rather fragmented state of the slabs is presumably also the consequence of them having been reused several times within the catacombs.

More generally speaking, in Late Antiquity, the fusion of poetic work and play was further developed as a poetic concept.[77] That poetry was a game with words and metrics no longer remained a mere metaphor. Various poems have games as their theme, such as some epigrams about board games in the *Anthologia Latina*, Symphosios' collection of *aenigmata*, or the epigram of Agathias about "Zeno's game of tables".[78] Poetic forms are compared with games, for example by Ausonius, who associates the Cento technique with the *Loculus Archimedius* or *Stomachion*. Still other authors bring their works into a form inspired by games: Optatian (3rd century AD) inscribes his poems in a gameboard-like grid.[79] This concept is also followed by the "*monosticha de ratione tabulae senis verbis et litteris*" of the so-called "*XII sapientes*",[80] which imitate *XII scripta/Alea* game board slogans through their

[76] ICUR IV n. 12238.

[77] For the following, compare now KÖRFER 2020, 315-333.

[78] *Anth. Lat.*, 70.182-185; *Anth. Lat.*, 281; *Anth. Pal.*, 9.482.

[79] On the *Carmina* of Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius, see ERNST 1991 and POLARA 2004 (Latin and Italian).

[80] FRIEDRICH 2002, 39-40 (text). Her commentary is mainly based on Austin's publications of the 1930s, but ignores the basic study by SCHÄDLER 1995, and therefore does not add much to our understanding of the game.

formal design as hexagrams. The *monosticha*, as well as a Greek hexameter about Palamedes, the presumed inventor of the game, given by Orion,[81] reveal the popularity of the hexagram among poets at the time. In this context, a look at the funerary inscription *RIB* I, 161 (*CIL* VII, 54) is particularly interesting: the slab was once part of a monumental tomb plinth, later built into the medieval wall of the city of Bath. Unfortunately, the stone is lost, but several drawings of it exist, which, despite some differences in detail, betray the author's efforts to bring the text into a hexagrammatic form. He did so by using ligatures and smaller sizes of letters (Fig. 6).[82] What the reader should see was "*D E C C O L*" in the first line on the left of an empty space and "*NI AE G L E V*" on the right, and "*V I X IT A N*" on the left in the second line with "*L X X X V I*" on the right. As a result, the layout of the inscription in the fashion of two rows of two six-letter words corresponds to *XII scripta/Alea* game boards.

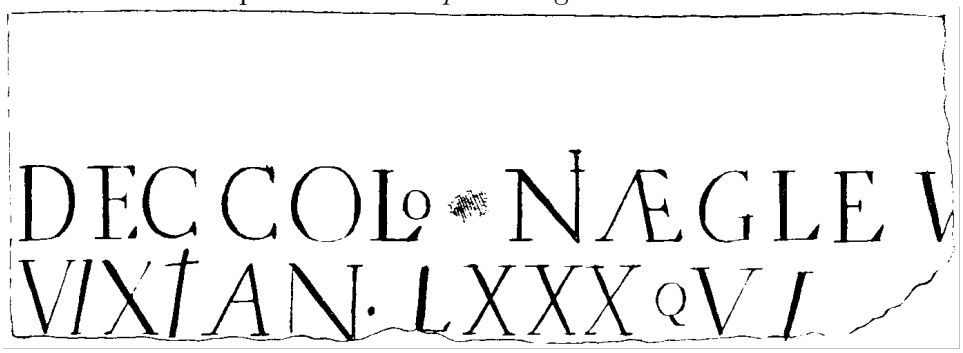


Figure 6: Funerary inscription. Lost, once in Bath, RIB I 161 (after J. Horsley, *Britannia Romana*, London, 1732, p. 326)

The "hexagrammatic" layout of the popular game perfectly satisfied the needs of such a ludic concept of poetry. This fusion of poetic form and game was not restricted to the sophisticated poetry of artists close to the imperial house. The sheer number of Greek and Roman *XII scripta/Alea* inscriptions, also on accessories such as the *turriculae*, reveal that the phenomenon

[81] Orion, *Etym.*, ed. STURZ 1820, col. 127,3, note 80 with ref. to RUHNKE 1789, 217b; FRIEDRICH 2002, 93; BAUMGARTNER 1981, comm. on *Anth. Lat.*, 82.1 R2; FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, 226 n. 193. Another Greek example is a board from Gigthis: FERRUA – BUSIA 2001, 233 n. 200 with bibl.

[82] See the drawings in: HORSLEY 1732, 326 Somersetshire V; SCARTH 1864, 63 pl. XXII; LYSTER 1684, 455-457, fig. 1.

established itself among "people of no account" too, as Agathias put it. Less talented poets adapted the wordings through compound spelling of words, a different orthography or by using ligatures, in order to fit into the 6 × 6 available spaces. Such everyday poetry comes from the middle of society, as the use of colloquial or even rude vocabulary, the use of dialect and spelling mistakes in the inscriptions betray. In conclusion, the "game board" inscriptions in the catacombs should be understood as literary imitations of *XII scripta/Alea* game boards, but not as "real" game boards once used in the homes of the living.

Abbreviations

CIG *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum*, IV, Berlin, 1877
CIL *Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum*, Berlin, 1863-…
EDCS Epigraphische Datenbank Clauss-Staby (http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epi.php?s_sprache=en)
ICUR *Inscriptiones christianae urbis Romae septimo saeculo antiquiores, nova series*, vol. 4, Coemeteria inter vias Appiam et Ardeatinam, ed. A. Ferrua (S.I.), Città del Vaticano 1964.

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