

BOOK REVIEW

Ancient Egyptians at Play: Board Games Across Borders. By WALTER CRIST, ANNE-ELIZABETH DUNN-VATURI, and ALEX DE VOOGT. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. Pp. xiv + 218. Paper, \$35.95. ISBN 978-1-4742-2117-7.

The past few decades have seen a steady rise in scholarly interest in ancient games. While athletic contests have long held the attention of researchers, board games have not often received the same level of investigation. Scholars no longer relegate these nonathletic games to the world of the childish or the trivial, but rather acknowledge their ability to illuminate myriad facets of culture as diverse as leisure, commerce, and religion. Crist, Dunn-Vaturi, and de Voogt are part of the new wave of exploration into the roles board games played in the ancient world, especially their use in and as social practices.¹

This book summarizes the evidence for board games in Egypt over a period of some five thousand years, “from Predynastic through Islamic times” (1). Crist, Dunn-Vaturi, and de Voogt synthesize archaeological, iconographical, and textual material to assess what is known about each of the board games the ancient Egyptians played and, at times just as importantly, what remains unknown. The authors state that their goal is “to aid in the identification of board games in archaeological contexts at sites within Egypt as well as in the neighboring regions” and note that doing so “provides evidence for a wider discussion on how games are transferred across cultural boundaries . . . both real and imagined” (1). Crist, Dunn-Vaturi, and de Voogt achieve both aims admirably.

The book is divided thematically and proceeds chronologically. The authors examine each of the “major games” (12) played in ancient Egypt, including those of Egyptian origin as well as those imported to the region. Included in the discussion of most games is a section detailing the limited evidence for the rules of playing these ancient games, as well as theories proposed in scholarship, but the authors rightly emphasize the difficulties of reconstruction. Chapter 1 introduces readers to the subject and to the wide array of casting devices used to determine piece movements.

¹ In the interest of full disclosure, I note here that I am listed in the Acknowledgements for answering an inquiry about one of the sources in this book.

Chapter 2 focuses on *mehen*, the most popular Predynastic board game, and discusses its role in religious and mortuary contexts, as well as its spread to the Levant and Cyprus. *Mehen* takes the form of a coiled serpent, a reflection of the deity with whom the game shares its name. Unlike more standardized games, *mehen* boards show great morphological variation; boards have been found with as few as forty-nine to as many as four hundred playing spaces spread out along two to seven spiraled coils. The chapter ends with a brief treatment of the lesser-known games of the period. Chapter 3 explores the development of *senet*, the most famous Egyptian board game. Crist, Dunn-Vaturi, and de Voogt pay special attention to the game's religious importance, which evolved over the three millennia during which it was played, reflected in part by developments in the decorations on the board's thirty squares. The game was increasingly associated with mortuary rituals and the afterlife until the end of the New Kingdom, after which time foreign influence likely impacted the cultural contexts of Egyptian gaming practices (60). Chapter 4 discusses the *game of twenty*, so called for the number of playing spaces on the board. Also called the *royal game of Ur* after the famous boards Leonard Woolley found in the Royal Cemetery at that site, this was the first foreign game played widely in Egypt and seems to have been linked to elite gift exchange. This game is mostly found in funerary contexts, often opposite *senet* on double-sided game boxes. Chapter 5 explores the game of *hounds and jackals*, which originated in Egypt and spread abroad, though the mechanisms of exchange are little understood. The game comprises a board of fifty-eight holes along which players move pegs shaped like the namesake animals. The boards themselves typically take the appearance of an axe blade or a violin, though one large example is shaped like a hippopotamus.

The next two chapters identify later games introduced to Egypt from abroad and the confusion they have caused. Chapter 6 details the one Greek and multiple Roman games found throughout Egypt, while Chapter 7 briefly discusses the later Arab and Ottoman games. Games of these periods were, the authors argue, imported through a combination of conquest, trade, and emulation. They are primarily of the graffiti type, carved into buildings or paved surfaces rather than existing as portable boards, leading to problems with dating. The creation of the structure on which a game is carved provides a *terminus post quem* for the game pattern, but does not imply that the game was concurrent with construction. The authors note that Arab and Ottoman games have been found scratched alongside Roman games on Pharaonic architecture, while some late games even reused and extended earlier Roman graffiti boards, necessitating great care when disentangling

the history of a site. Chapter 8 offers a brief conclusion that summarizes the themes of the book, including the regional, social, and temporal boundaries each game crossed.

The book is meticulously researched and citations are plentiful, although the number of references at times obstructs the authors' own arguments. The sections explaining the appearance(s) of board games can be quite dense, as the authors describe many examples in great detail. Fortunately, fifty-three black-and-white photographs, drawings, and maps clarify the verbal descriptions of artifacts, wall paintings, and carved game boards. Some typographical errors are spread throughout the book, but they are mostly limited to errant punctuation and subject-verb disagreement.

Crist, Dunn-Vaturi, and de Voogt have produced an appealing overview of board games in ancient Egypt. Although a few pages read like a catalog, this volume compiles all relevant scholarship into a digestible size and makes new arguments for cultural exchange between Egypt and its neighbors. This book will be an invaluable tool for anyone seeking to identify board games in the field and a helpful resource for anyone interested in ancient board games, ancient Egypt, or cultural exchange.

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