B`ard Games and Funerary Symb`lism in Greek and R`man C`ntexts[1]

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In Greece in the Archaic period miniature clay models of game-boards found in Attic tombs indicate that board games were symbolically associated in some way with death.[2] The earliest example, dating to the middle of the seventh century (protoattique moyen), comes from the offering trench of a cremation burial at Vari. The game-board has the form of a squareish table. The fields are marked out with painted lines and the sides were decorated with floral and abstract patterns Another example, dating to the early sixth century, was found in Opferplatz Y/Anlage LXXV of the Kerameikos. It was decorated with lions on the sides. Dice were found associated with the game-boards both at Vari and in the Kerameikos and the identification of the objects as miniature game-boards, rather than, for instance, as offering tables, can accordingly be considered certain. The symbolic character of these objects is reinforced by the figures of mourning women positioned at each corner (Fig. 1). A terracotta game-board, dated to the early sixth century, in the National Museum in Copenhagen, is possibly to be classified with the miniatures from the Kerameikos and Vari, even if it is of a different type. It is rectangular and the playing surface is marked out by nine incised lines parallel with the short sides. The sides of the table are decorated in black figure style; birds can be made out on the long sides. Two terracotta dice are still attached to the surface at each end of the board while there are traces of a third in the middle. Oval knobs at each end of the incised lines may represent the gaming pieces. The fact that dice and gaming pieces were attached to the board indicates that it was not used for actual playing. Although the board may have had some other kind of votive function, the most likely assumption is perhaps that it also came from a grave, even if there are no mourning women or any other indication that it

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[1] *Myth and Symb`l II. Symb`lic Phen`mena in Ancient Greek Culture. Papers fr`m the Sec`nd and Third Internati`nal Symp`sia `n Symb`lism at the N`rwegian Institute at Athens, September 21-24, 2000 and September 19-22, 2002* (ed. Synnøve des Bouvrie), Bergen 2004, 279-302.

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[2] Kübler 1970:512, Kat. 129, Pl. 102, Daux 1963:715. The evidence is discussed by Kurtz and Boardman 1971:77-78, Vermeule 1979:77-82, Garland 1985:70, Dillon 2002:281-82.

had a funerary function. The board was acquired in Athens, but nothing else is known about its provenance.[3]

Fig. 1 Miniature game-board from the Kerameikos. Kerameikos Inv. 45. Courtesy of the German Archaeological Institute, Athens

The significance of the occurrence of game-board models in Attic funerary contexts has been discussed most extensively by Vermeule, who suggested that they indicate that the Greeks may have seen the playing of board games as a metaphor for life and death.[4] In accordance with this idea, Vermeule also suggested that funerary symbolism is present in

[3] (Inv. no. 1950), Breitenstein 1941:19, no. 171, pl. 19, Lund and Bundgaard Rasmussen 1994:67.

[4] As pointed out by Vermeule, parallels can be found in literature. See also Kokolakes 1965:59-92.

portrayals of the doomed heroes Achilles and Ajax playing a board game, a theme which was very popular in Attic vase-painting of the late Archaic period.[5] In addition to vase-painting, it also occurs on shield bands found at Olympia and Aegina.[6] Otherwise, the significance of the miniature game boards do not seem to have aroused very much interest. Recently, however, Morris and Papadopoulos have argued in support of Vermeule's ideas.[7] It can also be mentioned that in opposition to Vermeule, whose idea he found too tendentious, Garland maintained that they should be seen as intended for entertainment in the Afterlife with no deeper symbolic meaning. That the board game in the vase scene with Achilles and Ajax refers to the fate of the two heroes has been discussed by Hurwit and by Morris.[8] Of considerable interest is Morris' idea that the scene may be a conscious reworking by Exekias of a Geometric funerary theme which shows two figures, commonly interpreted as musicians, seated on either side of a checkerboard pattern.[9]

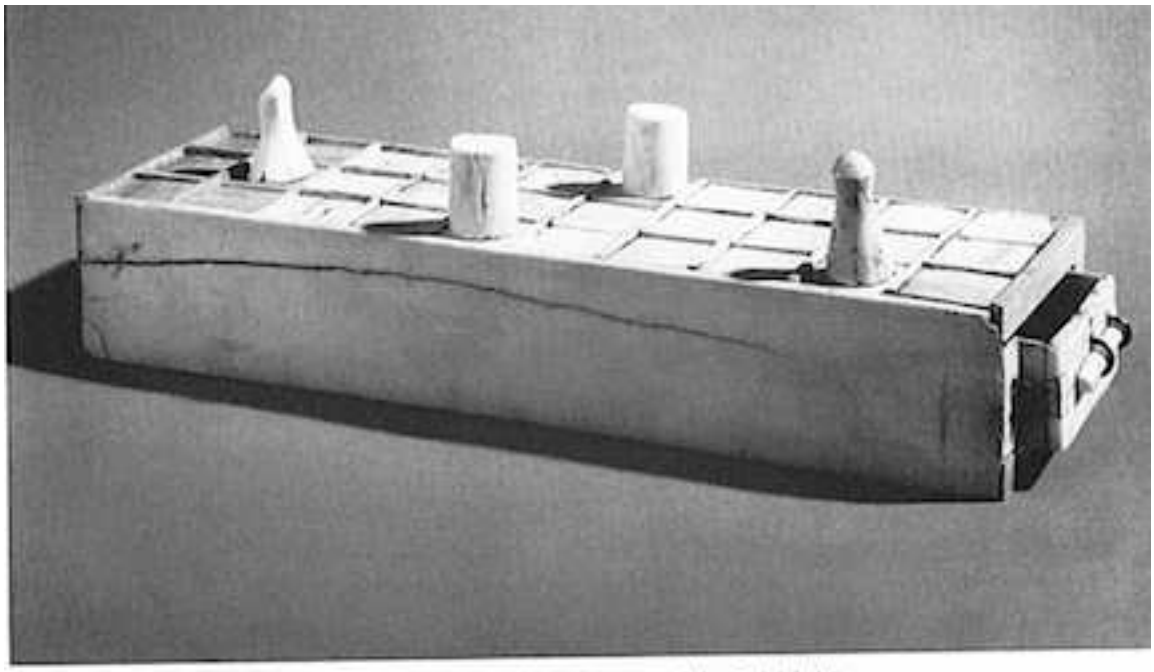

Fig. 2 Senet *game, New Kingdom. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum*

5 This motif first occurs in vase-painting about 530 BC. and remained popular into the early fifth century; more than 150 examples exist. For the different versions of this scene see *LIMC* s.v. 'Achilles' (Kossatz-Deissman 1981:96-103). See also Brommer 1974, Boardman 1978:18, Mackay 1978, Moore 1980:418-21, Buchholz 1987, Woodford 1982, Woodford 2003:116-17, Hurwit 1985:259-61, Morris 1997:69, Hedreen 2001:91-119, Morris and Papadopoulos, forthcoming. The motif is usually discussed in relation to the most famous version by Exekias on an amphora now in the Vatican Museum.

6 Kunze 1950:142-144.

7 Morris & Papadopoulos 2004:232-38.

8 Hurwit 1985:259-61, Morris 1997:69

9 See also Morris and Papadopoulos 2004:235.

An association between board games and funerary beliefs and practice is particularly well-attested from Egypt with regard to the game *Senet* (Fig.2). Examples of *Senet* boards have been found as grave-goods from the Pre-dynastic period onwards, and the game is also frequently represented in wall paintings within tombs.[10] Apart from being considered a suitable occupation for the dead, *Senet* was, at least from the time of the New Kingdom, associated with death and resurrection. Texts dating to the New Kingdom as well as to the Ptolemaic period indicate that the board used for playing the game could be seen as a representation of the Underworld. *Senet* was played on a rectangular board divided into thirty squares arranged in three rows of ten. Preserved examples of *Senet* boards show that the squares were at times elaborately inscribed, designating the path of the dead through the Underworld. In some representations of the game in tomb paintings, the deceased is shown playing against an invisible opponent.

In view of the Egyptian evidence, Vermeule suggests that the occurrence of miniature game-boards in funerary contexts in Attica indicates Egyptian influence on Greek funerary thought and imagery.[11] In support of this interpretation, she points to renewed contact with Egypt in the seventh and sixth centuries. In fact, archaeological evidence indicates that there may have been particularly close contacts between Athens and Egypt in this period. Egypt, and more specifically Naukratis, is the earliest overseas market for Attic pottery from the end of the seventh century. At the beginning of the sixth century, the export of Attic vases to Egypt increases markedly, and the largest concentration of Attic pottery found in Egypt dates to between 570 and 540.[12]

Moreover, the traditional Greek view of death, which has a certain generic ressemblance to Egyptian concepts, would fit well with Vermeule's hypothesis. In Greek thought death is commonly thought of as a process and the transfer from life to death is not instantaneous.[13] After departing from the body, the soul undertakes a journey across land and water before passing through the gates of the Underworld, which are guarded by Cerberos. Close contact between Athens and Egypt can also be seen to coincide with a developing interest in the Afterlife in the Archaic period, demonstrated, for instance, by the rise of religious-philosophical movements such as Orphism and Pythagoreanism, in which individual salvation played an important role.[14] Egyptian influence on Orphism has been recognised.[15] Perhaps more significantly, within the context of official state religion, interest

[10] Needler 1953, Vandier 1964:500, Pusch 1979, Piccione 1980, Idem 1984, Decker 1992:129.

[11] See also Morris and Papadopoulos 2004.

[12] On Attic pottery at Naukratis see Venit 1984.

[13] Burkert 1985:196-97, Garland 1985:13-20, Bremmer 2002:4.

[14] Bremmer 2002:11-26.

[15] Bremmer 2002:20-21.

in the fate of the individual after death is demonstrated by the growing popularity of the Eleusinian Mysteries.[16] Consequently, the Archaic period can be seen to have provided a fertile climate for Egyptian influence on the materialisation of eschatological beliefs in funerary ritual.

On the other hand, as artefacts, the miniature game-boards do not show any Egyptian influence but fit rather into a tradition of funerary imagery which can be traced back to the Geometric period, and even further if one wishes.[17] In the Archaic period, mourning women occur in funeral scenes on vases, on black-figure plaques used to decorate tombs and as figurines, either single or incorporated into larger objects including various types of vases, thymateria and terracotta models.[18] The square shape of the miniature game-boards show that they were clearly not intended to specifically represent *Senet*, but some other game, or possibly the general idea of board games. The incised parallel lines on the rectangular terracotta table in Copenhagen are also difficult to relate to *Senet*.[19] It can also be remarked that the dating of the Vari board to around the middle of the seventh century might be considered an argument against Egyptian influence.

More generally, it can be stated that various types of evidence suggest that the playing of board games is not uncommonly invested with symbolic meaning, often linked to cosmological beliefs.[20] An allegorical association between life and death or the transition from life to death and board games would seem to be so common that it can be considered in the nature of a cross-cultural phenomenon as can be illustrated by a few examples. The idea that human life can be seen in terms of movements across a chess-board where death always says checkmate in the end was common in Medieval Europe.[21] It is, for instance, graphically illustrated by a late Medieval wall painting from Täby Church in Central Sweden which depicts a prosperous man playing chess with Death conventionally depicted as a skeleton (fig. 3).[22] The original Indian version of the game *Snakes and Ladders* was a representation of the journey through life where the player advances from the lower levels associated with earthly desires to the higher associated with spiritual values, eventually reaching Vishnu or

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16 Clinton 1993.

17 Higgins 1967:22, Vermeule 1979:63, Eadem 1983, Kurtz 1984:315.

18 Boardman 1955, Higgins 1967:43, Hampe 1960:74, Garland 1985, Dillon 2002:274-81.

19 It has been suggested that they indicate a board used for playing the game of πέντε γραμμάι, known from Greek literature (Pritchett 1968:197).

20 See for instance the discussion on Shiva's game playing in Handelman and Shulman 1997. I owe this reference to Professor Synnøve des Bouvrie, University of Tromsø.

21 Murray 1913:536.

22 Cornell 1981:62, Pl. 44. This symbolism was also utilised by Ingmar Bergman in his well-known film *The Seventh Seal* (cf. Holland 1959-60 on the imagery of this film).

Nirvana; the ladders represent virtues which help the player on his way, while the snakes represent vices which impede progress.[23]

Fig. 3 Albertus Pictor, Death at the chessboard, Täby Church, Sweden. Photograph by H. Cornell & S. Wallin, Courtesy of Antikvariska-topografiska arkivet, Riksantikvarieämbetet, Stockholm

More concretely, the playing of board games can also constitute a part in funerary ritual. The term Mancala is used for a family of board games which are widely found in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. An association with death or funerals occurs many places where this game is played.[24] In Surinam, it was associated with houses of mourning in which the dead were placed in the interval before burial.[25] The game was played by mourners and

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[23] Shimkhada 1983, Topsfield 1985, Handelman and Shulman 1997:33, Parlett 1999:93-94. Early versions of Snakes and Ladders in England were also heavily imbued with moral symbolism. An effective use of the game as an allegory for progress through life can be seen in David Lodge's novel *H`w far can y`u g`?*, published in 1980.

[24] Parlett 1999:207-223, Townshend 1979.

[25] Murray 1952:202, 235, Parlett 1999:218.

the purpose seems to have been to amuse the spirit of the dead in order to keep him from coming back among the living. In Sulawesi in Indonesia, the game was called Galatjang and was customarily played during the time of mourning.[26] Clearly, if the miniature game-boards do refer to the passage from life to death, their significance is not necessarily to be attributed to Egyptian influence, although the possibility, or even probability, remains.

Furthermore, other interpretations are possible. Cross-cultural evidence also indicates that board games in funerary contexts can function as status markers. Gaming-pieces for some kind of board game are quite common in Scandinavian tombs of the Iron Age and later periods.[27] The symbolic value of game-boards and gaming-pieces in Scandinavian burial contexts has been little discussed. However, in those cases where they represent rare imported items and have been found in graves which are otherwise rich in grave goods, their occurrence has been associated with elite expression.[28] The fact that gaming-pieces are objects of value and display further suggests that playing board-games may have been seen as an activity particularly associated with high status. A parallel can be found in the social significance of chess, which was in India from the time of its invention associated with leisure and a cultivated lifestyle.[29] Also in Medieval Europe, chess had connotations relating to social status, and chess pieces and game-boards were often objects of value.[30] Since the playing of board games can be regarded as a non-productive activity, yet one which requires time and often skill, it can be suggested that the association between board games and status can, to a certain extent at least, be explained in terms conspicuous leisure.[31]

Today, skill at chess is often considered a clear sign of high intelligence, and the idea that board games requiring skill reveal superior mental qualities is widespread.[32] Board games can accordingly also be associated with the expression of status in a more specific

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[26] Murray 1952:175.

[27] Petersen 1914.

[28] For example, one of the richest Norwegian graves from the Roman Iron Age at Avaldsnes in western Norway contained thirty-one large gaming-pieces made of glass. An exceptionally rich grave from the eight century, also at Avaldsnes, contained two sets of imported gaming-pieces, one made of glass and the other of amber. As gaming-pieces made of glass or amber are very rare in Norway in this period, they can in both cases be interpreted as a reflection of the desire of the Iron Age elite to advertise its connections with the Continent (Opedal 1998:53-55).

[29] Eales 1985:30.

[30] Eales 1985:50-51, 53, 57-58, Parlett 1999:301.

[31] For the concept of conspicuous leisure, which refers to the means by which an elite seeks to distinguish itself from the lower classes by devoting its time to non-productive activities, see Veblen 1970 (1899):41-60.

[32] The association of difficult board games with intelligence is for example vividly illustrated by Silvia Nasar's description of their popularity among mathematicians at Princeton in her biography of John Forbes Nash Jr. (*A Beautiful Mind* 1998).

way, symbolising mental qualities associated with the elite. The association of board games requiring skill with intelligence as a prerogative of high status can in many cases be explained by a perceived connection between skill at board games and military ability. Chess, for instance, was originally a symbolic representation of warfare, and this was not without relevance to its popularity among the elite both in Asia and Medieval Europe.[33] In Japan playing the complicated game Go was regarded as useful to the study of tactics and strategy by the warrior class which ruled Japan from the twelfth to the nineteenth century.[34] In many African societies, expertise in the board game Mancala was considered indicative of intelligence and the capacity for strategic planning. Because these are qualities suitable for chiefs, the game was associated with the prominent position of many elders.[35] The significance of this association is clearly demonstrated by the fact that a game of Mancala formed part of the ritual surrounding the installation of a new Ganda king. The symbolic association of chiefly qualities and Mancala is clearly illustrated by the late eighteenth century wooden statue of King Shyaam aMbul aNgoong, the founder of the Bushoong ruling Dynasty of Congo. The king is seated in front of a game board which functioned as an emblem of his kingship (fig. 4).[36] This association between mental qualities, status, and board games has been utilised in a recent analysis of the burials in the Anglo-Saxon cemetery site at Spong Hill in Norfolk (c. AD 540-600). In his discussion of the meaning of the grave goods Ravn points out that the male burials which could be identified as the most prestigious seem to exhibit a significant relationship between adult men, horses, and gaming-pieces. He therefore suggests that the presence of gaming-pieces among the grave-goods could have symbolised intelligence and qualities of leadership, in particular the ability to lead a battle.[37] Ravn supports his interpretation by reference to northern European mythology, in which horses and board games are associated with the war god Odin. It would seem not improbable that the occurrence of game-boards in chieftain graves of the Viking period can be interpreted in a similar light as symbols of chiefly intelligence and authority.[38] Similar thoughts may also

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[33] Eales 1985:31-36, Parlett 1999:6.

[34] Parlett 1999:169-70.

[35] Townshend 1977:65-67, Idem 1979.

[36] Information derived from the British Museum internet site, *C`mpass*; see also Parrinder 1982.

[37] Ravn 2000:289-91.

[38] Petersen 1914:84-85. The most well-known is the wooden game-board found in the Gokstad ship dated to the end of the ninth century which is on display in the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo. According to Petersen (1914:78, 90), gaming-pieces occur in both male and female graves in the Iron Age, while in the Viking period, gaming pieces and game-boards seem to be exclusively associated with male burials. If this observation still holds true, then it seems that there was a shift in meaning and that contrary to earlier periods, in the Viking age board games came to represent specifically male qualities. See also Owen and Dalland (1999:127-132) on gaming-pieces and game-boards found in chieftain graves of the Viking period.

lie behind the presence of four elaborately decorated game-boards which were found in the royal tombs at Ur (ca. 2600-2350 BC). Most of the artefacts found with the dead could be classified as symbols of position and power.[39]

Fig. 4 Wooden statue of King Shyaam aMbul aNgoong of Congo seated in front of a Mancala board. Museum of Mankind. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

An interpretation of the meaning of the miniature game boards which emphasises conspicuous leisure and military ideals as elements of status expression fits well with a consideration of Archaic Greek society. Conspicuous leisure undoubtedly formed part of the self-expression of the Athenian upper class.[40] In the *Republic*, Plato remarks that competence at board games requires intense practice of a kind which would only be possible for those with plenty of leisure time (374c).[41] The idea that playing board games was seen as a typical

[39] Woolley 1946:35, Pl. 11, see Pollock 1991:180 on the interpretation of the grave-goods.

[40] Cf. Thuc. 1.6,3-5.

[41] πεττευτικὸς δὲ ἢ κυβευτικὸς ἱκανῶς οὐδ ’ ἂν εἷς γένοιτο, μὴ αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἐκ παιδὸς ἐπιτηδεύων, ἀλλὰ παρέργῳ χρωμένος. See also Pol. 292e; Rep. 333a-b, 487b. The association between board game and

aristocratic pastime and could therefore function as a recognised symbol of status seems quite possible. Because the heroic connotations of warfare played a central part in Athenian aristocratic culture, the symbolic aspects of board games could have been reinforced by the fact that popular ancient board games may have replicated military battles. It has recently increasingly been stressed that the lifestyle of the Athenian upper class was heavily determined by imitation of the Near East.[42] It could therefore reasonably be argued that a possible association of board games with status is most likely to have been derived from eastern contacts. However, Archaic society was also permeated by Homeric values and ideals.[43] The Homeric poems and the epic tradition suggest that board games were associated with both conspicuous leisure and warfare. In the Odyssey the suitors of Penelope spend their time playing board games in the intervals between their feasting, in what is clearly meant to be an ostentatious display of idleness (1.106-108). Although the association of board games with the suitors might be thought to have markedly negative overtones, it can be argued that the activity in itself, like feasting, was considered a part of typical aristocratic behaviour. The reprehensibility of the suitors lies in the fact that they achieve their lifestyle at the expense of another man's estate rather than in their activities as such.[44] Board games are connected with warfare and specifically with the Trojan War tradition in Greek literature. According to Sophokles Palamedes invented dice and board games in order to combat the boredom of the long stay at Aulis, and Euripides describes the two Ajaxes, Protesilaos, and Palamedes playing games at Aulis.[45] The Homeric heroes were also believed to have spent their time playing in the intervals between fighting at Troy. The Hellenistic geographer Polemon mentions that it is possible to see a stone used by the Greeks as a game board on the Trojan plain.[46] Evidence for a recognised association beween board games and strategic abilities can be seen in the fact that Palamedes was also associated with innovations in military strategy.[47]

Heroisation of the dead in the sense that the deceased was implicitly compared to the Homeric heroes can be said to have been a determining feature of high-status burials from the

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aristocratic leisure would also seem evident from Gorgias' Palamedes where the playing of board games is called σχολῆς ἄλυτον διατριβήν. On board games in Plato see also Hansen 2002:19-22.

[42] Kurke 1992, Neer 2002:19-22

[43] Murray 1983

[44] For a different interpretation of the game-playing of the suitors see Kurke 1992:253-55, Eadem 1999:254-60. See also Morris and Papadopoulos 2004:235.

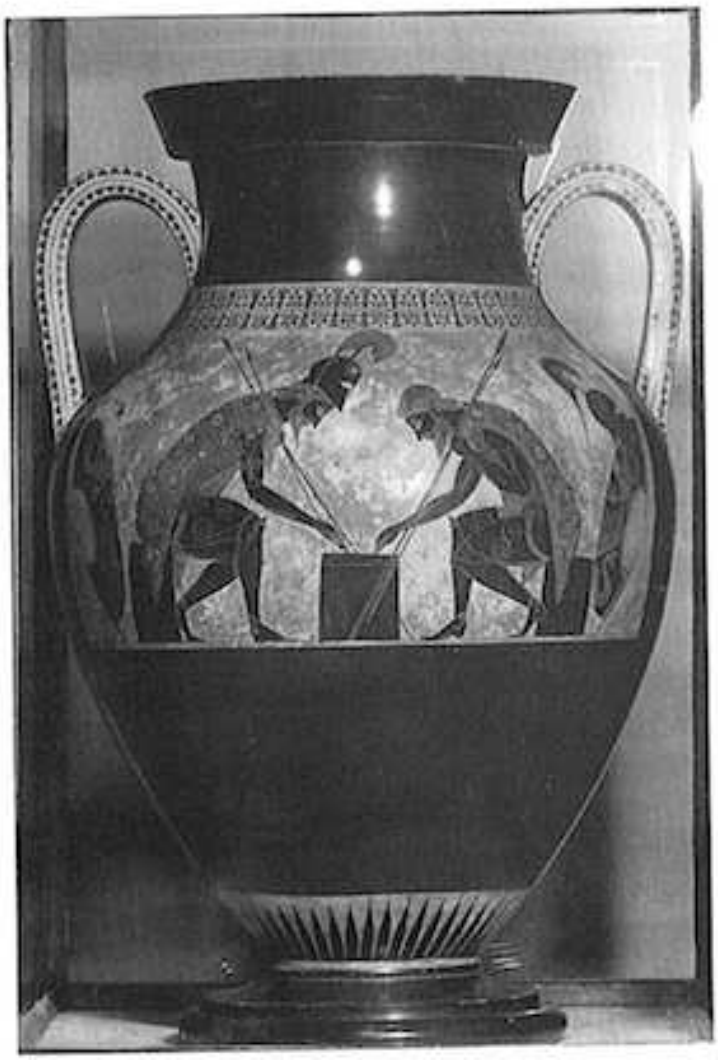
[45] Soph. *Frag*. 479; Eur. *IA* 192-199.

[46] Preller 1834:64, frag. 32.

[47]Gorg. frag. B 11a 30; Aesch. *Palamedes* 304. The literary evidence, furthermore, indicates that a metaphoric connection between warfare and board games would seem to have been a commonplace. A symbolic association between warfare, strategic thinking, and board games can, for instance, be found in Plato (Rep. 422e), cf. Ridgeway 1886.

Geometric period onwards.[48] It can be suggested that the primary meaning of the miniature game-boards in funerary contexts derives from the epic tradition and that they refer to the social status of the deceased. Accordingly, they were intended to recall the lifestyle of the deceased as a member of the elite, and functioned as symbols of the conspicuous leisure and military ideology associated with the Athenian nobility. The mourning women at the corners of the boards reinforce the message by referring to the heroisation of the dead in aristocratic funerary ritual. The lions on the side of the Kerameikos table can also be said to emphasize the heroic connotations associated with the miniature game boards.

Fig 5 Amphora by Exekias, Courtesy of Hirmer Fotoarchiv



A similar interpretation derived from the connection between military preeminence and skill at board games can be suggested for the vases depicting Ajax and Achilles playing a board game (fig. 5). The theme of two warriors seated at the game table exists in more than one hundred and fifty examples. Strictly speaking, only on those vases on which they are provided with names can the two warriors with certainty be identified as Achilles and Ajax.

[48] Houby-Nielsen 1995:165-66, Eadem 1996:41-54.

However, because they are never identified as any other heroes, it can reasonably if not with complete certainty be assumed that they were intended to represent Achilles and Ajax also in those cases in which they were not provided with painted inscriptions.[49] In any case, the number of inscribed vases indicates a particular connection between these two heroes and the playing of board games. The various versions of the scene differ considerably. The fact that Athena is present in some versions of the scene has been taken to indicate that the scene is narrative, representing a specific episode of the Trojan Cycle as originally suggested by Robert, and more recently by Boardman and Hedreen.[50] In some examples, she seems to be agitatedly summoning the heroes back to the battlefield. Two black figure vases and two red figure cups seem to show the warriors playing in the midst of battle can be seen to support this hypothesis.[51] However, the fact that Athena does not appear on the earliest vases, suggets that she did not play a fundamental role to the understanding of the scene. It would therefore seem more likely that the presence of Athena is emblematic, as patron of Achilles, rather than narrative.[52] Boardman has also suggested that the popularity of the scene in the late Archaic period could be associated with the story told by Herodotos (1.62-64) that the Athenians were dining, napping, and playing dice when Peisistratos gained control of Athens in 546. The point of the motif would be to console the Athenians by showing that even the greatest heroes could be so caught up in a game that they were oblivious to danger. Boardman's suggestion is consonant with the idea that board games were a recognised symbol of leisure. It is dependent on the understanding of the scene as a representation of a well known episode from the epic tradition as well as on the assumption that its relevance to contemporary Athenian politics would have been understood and appreciated by those who used the vases. This does not seem an entirely impossible hypothesis.[53] Conversely, because Herodotus wrote almost a hundred years after the events he describes, his account of Athenian passivity with regard to Peisistratos could be based on stories invented long afterwards. It is also an open question to what extent mythological subjects in vase-painting should be related to contemporary historical events.[54] However, given the artistic freedom most of us assume Athenian vase painters had, there is no compelling reason why they should not have chosen

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[49] Boardman 1978:19, n.42, Woodford 1982:177, Hedreen 2001:92, *LIMC s.v.* 'Achilles' (Kossatz-Deissman 1981:103).

[50] Robert 1892:57, n. 36, Boardman 1974:231, cf. Hedreen 2001:92.

[51] Boardman1974:231, 1978:19, Woodford 1982:175, Hedreen 2001:96-104.

[52] Cf. Boardman 1974:218-19; see also the commentary in *LIMC s.v.* 'Achilles' (Kossatz-Deissman 1981:103)

[53] 1978:24. Kurke's objection (1999:271-272, n.46) that Herodotus wrote κύβοι rather than πέσσοι does not seem valid to me; the fact that in English one is unlikely to refer to a board game, even one that requires dice, as a game of dice does not mean that the ancient Greeks might not have done so.

[54] Cf. Woodford 2003:141-42, Bazant 1982, Cook 1987.

to comment on specific political events.[55] As mentioned above, Morris has associated the scene with an earlier Geometric theme. Woodford and Thompson have also argued that the variations in the elements of the scene suggests that its origin lies in art rather than literature and therefore does not reflect epic narrative.[56]

Characteristic of all versions is that the status of the heroes as warriors would seem to be deliberately emphasised. They hold their spears while playing and usually wear full body armour. Helmets and shields are either worn or shown lying on the ground directly behind them. Rather than interpreting this in narrative terms, as does Hedreen, it would seem possible to argue that the heroes are shown fully armed in order to convey a conceptual link between military activity and the playing of board games.[57] In the Iliad, Achilles and Ajax are the foremost warriors among the Greeks, and it can therefore be proposed that the scene was intended to reflect a specific connection between the military prominence of Ajax and Achilles and their skill at or fondness for board games.[58] According to this interpretation, one could see the presence of the war goddess Athena as referring to the intelligence and strategic abilities of the heroes. The scene clearly shows that the winner is Achilles and it can be argued that his superior skill at board games reflects his status as top warrior, superior also to Ajax.

Death and heroic values are closely allied, and an emphasis on the aristocratic and Homeric connotations associated with the playing of board games does not, however, exclude symbolic connotations associated with the transition from life to death. A number of arguments can be made in support of Vermeule's reading of the scene, which sees the two heroes as symbolic figures representing the shortness of life and the suddenness and inevitability of death. In some versions of the scene there are birds, flying between the two heroes. Because birds were a common and easily understood symbol of death, they may have been included by some vase painters in order to emphasise the funerary connotations of the scene.[59] More clearly significant is the fact that the scene occurs on White-Ground lekythoi, the decoration of which was often bound up with death in some way.[60] The association between board games and death would seem explicit, as pointed out by Vermeule, in a black-figure cup which shows two seated male figures with wings playing a board game (Fig. 6).[61]

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[55] Boardman 1984:240-241.

[56] Thompson 1976:31, Woodford 1982:178-80.

[57] Hedreen (2002:98-99) argues that the fact that the heroes are shown fully armed indicates that the game is taking place at Troy rather than in Aulis and that they are playing near the enemy lines, away from the safety of the tents.

[58] *Il*. 2.268-9; 17.278-80; *Od*.11.550-51.

[59] On the other hand, the function of the birds might be to indicate an outdoor setting. Cf. Hedreen 2001:101

[60] Knigge 1976:Pl. 20, no. 10, 11, 12, Pl. 21, no. 7.

[61] Vermeule 1979:81, fig. 36.

Fig. 6 Two winged figures playing a board game. National Museum, Copenhagen Inv. 13521. Courte Nationalmuséets Antiksamling

The identity of the winged figures is uncertain. Vermeule sees them as death demons or possibly as Thanatos and Eros and suggests that they may be gambling for a man's soul.[62] Woodford refers to them as winged youths.[63] However, the scene is a deliberate variant on the theme of Ajax and Achilles playing a board game and this suggests a somewhat different interpretation. It can be proposed that the vase painter has picked up on the death connotations of the scene and taken it a step further. In Greek vase-painting, the *eid`la* of the dead are usually shown winged and a possible interpretation of these winged figures is that they represent the two heroes after their death.[64] Instead of spears they hold *kerykeia*, which, because they allude to the god Hermes as psychopompos, are possibly to be understood as symbolising the transition to the world of the dead. A further connection between the playing of board games and the Underworld is provided by Pausanias' description of Polygnotos' painting of Odysseus in the Underworld in the Knidian Lesche at Delphi (X.31). The painting showed Palamedes and Thersites playing a game while both Ajaxes watch, presumably

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[62] Vermeule 1979:82, 159-160.

[63] 1982:177.

[64] I owe this idea to Dr. Sven von Hofsten. For an example of the depiction of an eidolon which is comparable to the winged figures on the vase see the Amphora of the Leagros-group which shows Achilles on his way to Leuke (*CVA* British Museum 4, pl. 58).

standing on either side of the players.[65] Pausanias comments that Polyghotos' choice of heroes in the scene is to be explained by the fact that they were all enemies of Odysseus. However, they are also all heroes who did not die a normal warrior's death in battle and it would seem possible that this is the context in which the scene should be understood. Palamedes, the inventor of board games, died as a result of trickery and betrayal, Ajax son of Oileus drowned on his way home from Troy, and Thersites was killed by Achilles. Arguing back from Polygnotus' depiction of the Underworld, it can be suggested that the scene with the two winged figures on the late Archaic cup should be seen as an early nekyia and a forerunner to the larger and more elaborate representations of the Underworld in the Classical period.

Exekias is generally considered either the inventor of the scene depicting Achilles and Ajax playing a board game or the first to introduce it to vase-painting, and the scene can be related to Exekias' other vases which depict Ajax and Achilles. In the epic tradition Achilles and Ajax are linked in death. Ajax saved the dead body of Achilles and carried it away from the battlefield and his suicide was a consequence of the competition for the arms of Achilles.[66] Both of these episodes were painted by Exekias, and it could be argued that the scene of Achilles and Ajax at the game-board is to be understood as a more subtle variation on the same underlying theme. Exekias seems to have had a particular fondness for Ajax and Boardman has hinted that Exekias might have had some connection with Salamis.[67] Moore has suggested that the reason may have been that Exekias himself was from Salamis and therefore wished to promote the hero of his homeland.[68] Shapiro suggests that the occurrence of the hero in Athenian vase-painting reflects the political and historical circumstances related to Athenian control of Salamis, although he does not completely deny Exekias' personal interest in Ajax.[69] However, it may rather be that Exekias' main interest in Ajax was that he found him, as he also did Achilles, ideal for expressing the close connection between

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[65] According to Woodford (1982:180), Pausanias' text suggests that Salaminian Ajax was also participating in the game. She then argues that Polygnotos had renewed the game-playing motif by adding a third person and that this may be the reason for its loss of popularity among vase painters in the early Classical period. It seems to me that the Greek can be understood in this way, but that it is not the most probable reading. See Stansbury-O'Donnell 1990 for a reconstruction of Polygnotos' *Nekyia*.

[66] Cf. Boardman 1978:18, Woodford 1982:178, Moore 1980:424-31, Hurwit 1985:260-261, Morris and Papadopoulos 2004:235.

[67] Boardman 1978:24.

[68] Moore 1980:433-434.

[69] Shapiro 1981.

heroic valour and death. This is a theme which can be seen to be closely related to the function of the vases as drinking vessels.[70]

Most of the vases on which the scene with Ajax and Achilles playing a board game occurs were made primarily for use in the symposium.[71] The importance of the symposium as a ritual activity affirming the collective identity of the Athenian elite has recently been much emphasised.[72] The symposium can be viewed as an extreme manifestation of conspicuous leisure but it also functioned to reinforce the warrior ideology of the Athenian aristocracy.[73] The scenes of warfare depicted on sympotic pottery can therefore be said to have reflected the ideological concerns of the symposium. From this perspective, the function of imagery related to the epic tradition can then be seen as the heroisation of the symposiasts, allowing them, within the closed context of the aristocratic drinking-party, to represent themselves as Homeric warriors. The symposium was moreover the occasion for the performance of poetry. The ultimately Homeric thought that life is short and death can come suddenly is a theme that is common in lyric poetry and it can be argued that the image of Achilles and Ajax playing a board game on vessels used for drinking was also intended to evoke similar thoughts.[74] It can therefore be suggested that the popularity of the scene is derived from its particular appropriateness to the mood of the symposium.[75]

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[70] Boardman (1978:18) has remarked that on Exekias' vases, Ajax and Achilles appear in scenes which seem deliberately chosen to express most fully the heroic values of the Greeks.

[71] Murray 1983:195, Neer 2002:9-26.

[72] Murray 1983.

[73] Cf. Murray (1991) who points to interconnections between warrior ideology and ritualised drinking.

[74] Cf. Aeschylos (*Sept.* 414) for metaphoric connections of dice with both warfare and the suddeness of death. See Murray 1983, Neer 2002 for the relations between poetry and the pottery used at the symposium.

[75] The majority of these vases, including the most well known example by Exekias, were found in Etruscan tombs. The popularity of the scene in Etruria is also indicated by the fact that it found on Etruscan mirrors of the third century, a time when it no longer occurs in Attic vase-painting (Fittà 1998:fig. 259). It seems quite improbable, however, that the vases were made specifically for the Etruscan market. Nor is it possible to conclude that the theme was more popular in Etruria than in Athens. The shield bands from Aegina and Olympia as well as the fact that the motif was copied in Corinthian pottery indicate that it was well-known and "circulated" within Greece before the end of the sixth century. According to Spivey (1991:145-50) Etruscan readings of scenes of Greek myth were conditioned by the frequent funerary use of imported Greek vases. On the other hand, it has recently been stressed that Attic imports were mainly intended for banquets (Rathje 1990, Barker and Rasmussen 2000:134, Reusser 2002). Accordingly, the occurrence of Attic vases in a funerary context can be seen to refer back to the symposium. However, as scenes of banquets and symposia are popular in Etruscan funerary imagery, it might perhaps be maintained that the funerary connotations of the scene were recognised by the Etruscans and that for this reason they may have found the theme particularly appealing on vessels used in banquets and later deposited in tombs. A wall-painting from the Tomba dell'Orco II in Tarquinia

This double message of heroisation and the inevitability of death can also explain the use of the scene for the decoration of shield bands. Turning back to the earlier material and the miniature game-board models, it can be asked whether ideas concerning the passage from life to death were associated also with them. The epic tradition suggests that this may have been the case. In the Odyssey, when Athena, disguised as Mentes, arrives at Odysseus' palace, the first thing she sees is the suitors playing a board game in front of the doorway, sitting on the skins of Odysseus' cattle which they themselves have slaughtered. It is tempting to see the game-playing of the suitors not only as an expression of their idleness, but also as a reference to their future fate when they themselves will be slaughtered like animals. Furthermore, in addition to Ajax and Achilles, board games seem, as noted above, to be particularly associated with heroes whose deaths were in some way exceptional.[76] Accordingly, it can be suggested that an association between the playing of board games and the fate of certain heroes was part of the epic tradition and that this is not irrelevant to the interpretation of the miniature game boards. In summary, it seems likely that the presence of the miniature game boards in burial contexts functioned primarily as status markers but it can be argued that their meaning also encompassed the idea that death can come suddenly and unexpectedly and losing the game of life is a fate which the deceased shares with the heroes of epic poetry. Arguably they may also have been intended to affirm that the aristocratic lifestyle of the deceased will continue after the passage from life to death.[77]

The question of whether the funerary connotations of board games represent Egyptian influence remains open. Egyptian beliefs were connected with the particularities of Senet and not with board games in general. The squares of the Senet board represented specific stages in the passage of the dead through the Underworld before arriving at the judgement of his soul and attainment of eternal life. The Greek beliefs about life and death which were arguably associated with board games seem to have been of a much more general nature. If they have their origin in contact with Egypt, it would seem that they were quickly absorbed and associated with the Greek heroic world. That Egyptian beliefs were transformed and inserted into the Greek heroic tradition is argued by Morris and Papadopoulos who suggest that the funerary associations of board games may have reached the Aegean, possibly

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dating to the second half of the fourth century shows Theseus and presumably Perithous seated playing a board game while being menaced by a female demon.

[76] See also Morris and Papadopoulos,2004:235.

[77] It could be suggested that the evidence suggests that the playing of board games was particularly associated with male values in Archaic Athens. This does not seem to have been the case in Etruria, on the other hand, where gaming pieces and dice are often found in high status female burials. It is possible that although the symbolic connotations of board games in both Attica and Etruria may have had a common origin, the Etruscans may have been more interested in the manifestation of conspicuous leisure than in military values

transmitted by the Phoenicians, already in the Late Bronze Age or soon afterwards.[78] There is, moreoever, literary evidence which provides some support for Egyptian influence. In the Phaedrus (274.d1) Plato attributes the invention of board games to the Egyptian god Thot. Plato connects the invention of board games with the discovery of writing, numeracy, and astronomy, an association which may seem logical but which does not find support in the Egyptian sources.[79] Vasunia has therefore argued that the attribution of the invention of board games to Thot as god of writing reflects a Greek and not an Egyptian way of thinking.[80] However, although Thot does not seem to be known as the inventor of board games in the Egyptian tradition, as escort and protector of the dead through the Underworld he was clearly associated with the symbolic meaning of Senet. The first square on the Senet board was accordingly called the "House of Thot".[81] Plato may therefore be correct in associating Thot with board games but he may have misunderstod or not have had precise information about the nature of the association. It is also possible that the surviving Egyptian material is defective with regard to Thot's role as inventor god. Thot was identified with Hermes and one of the main functions that the two gods had in common was that of psychopompos. It is interesting to note that according to Suetonius, who wrote a now, more or less, lost book about Greek games, Hermes was regarded by the Greeks as the patron of games played with dice. In the Budé edition of the preserved fragments, Taillardat connects this information with the role of Hermes as protector of the gymnasion and the palaestra.[82] However, it might be possible to connect Suetonius' statement with the passage in the Phaedrus, and argue that Hermes as patron of board games is the result of his assimilation to Thot. Despite the fact that Plato does not mention the funerary aspects of Thot's association with board games, it could be argued that this is the context in which the role of Hermes as patron of board games should be seen.

Both gaming-pieces and dice occur occasionally in Roman tombs. Their significance is difficult to interpret.[83] They may reflect the idea that life can be compared to a game of chance where losing represents death, but they may also be personal possessions, or provisions for entertainment in the Afterlife. A funerary relief from Palmyra, which shows three men at a game board would seem to indicate that board games had a deeper symbolic

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[78] Morris & Papadopoulos 2004:237..

[79] Plato elsewhere connects the playing of board games with mathematics and geometry (Gorg. 450d).

[80] Vasunia 2001:148-55.

[81] Piccione 1980:56.

[82] 1967:151. Suetonius mentions both Hermes and Pan as patrons of board games. Taillardat finds no explanation for Pan's connection with board games and dice. A possible explanation, and one related to the symbolic connotations of board games, could be that the brief moment of uncertainty experienced after the dice have been thrown and before the outcome is clear was naturally associated with the terror induced by the god.

[83] Egidi 1983, cf. Toynbee 1971:52.

significance in the Roman empire, as pointed out by Vermeule.[84] A similar relief from Trier, which shows two men playing while a third watches, indicates that the motif was widespread in funerary imagery.[85] Literary evidence can be adduced for the suggestion that the significance of game boards in funerary contexts in the Roman Empire was related to the transfer from life to death. In the episode of Petronius' *Satyrica* known as the *Cena Trimalchi`nis*, Trimalchio is described as being in the middle of a solitary board game as he is carried into the dining-room where his guests are already assembled. The novel's narrator, Encolpius, also makes a point of the fact that instead of regular gaming pieces, Trimalchio makes use of gold and silver coins. It has often been remarked that Trimalchio's dinner-party is modelled on a descent into the Underworld and consequently is permeated with funerary themes and imagery.[86] It is therefore not unresonable to see deliberate funerary symbolism also in Trimalchio's game. The motif of solitary game-playing has a certain similarity to Egyptian representations in which the dead is shown playing against an invisible opponent. It does not seem impossible that the funerary connotations of the Egyptian game Senet were known to the Romans and utilised here by Petronius. It could be suggested that Trimalchio's opponent in the game is meant to be understood as death. Coins are found in both Greek and Roman burials.[87] The presence of an obol between the teeth of the dead occurs sporadically in Greece from the fifth century and more frequently, although far from universally, from the Hellenistic period onwards. This custom has most often been interpreted as the fee for Charon known from literature.[88] It has, however, been pointed out that large amounts of coins which are quite common in Roman burials are likely to be unconnected with Charon. The chthonic aspects of coins are also illustrated by the fact that according to Roman custom coins were thrown into the Lacus Curtius, which was regarded as an opening into the Underworld, at the beginning of the year.[89] Considering this practice and the literary and archaeological evidence for the belief in payment to Charon, it can be suggested that Trimalchio's use of coins as gaming-pieces is connected in some way with symbolism regarding entrance into the Underworld.

Board games can be seen to have played a role in funerary symbolism in both Archaic Greece and Imperial Rome and evidence may exist from other times and places in the Graeco-Roman world. This should probably be taken as an illustration of the universality of

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[84] Vermeule 1979:79, fig. 34.

[85] May 1992:30.

[86] Saylor 1987, Bodel 1999:46.

[87] Purcell (1995:22), however, associates the coins with the link between gambling and game-playing. Saylor (1987:597) and Pack (1974:214-215) suggest that Trimalchio is showing off and sees his solitary game-playing as a demonstration of his competitiveness.

[88] Garland 1985:23, Vermeule 1979:212, Stevens 1991, Grinder-Hansen 1991.

[89] Stevens 1991:228.

ideas concerning the funerary connotations of board-games rather than as evidence for any real continuity, even if the image of Trimalchio as a Homeric hero has an obvious comic resonance.

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