

Divination and Recreation in Ancient Near Eastern Board Games

Introduction

The study of Ancient Near Eastern Board Games is a difficult one since very little progress has been made in our documentation about those games and in our interpretation of them. Every kind of documentation concerning this topic is available: archaeological resources, literature and paintings both on walls and ceramics.

I have limited my research to a certain type of board games, games mixing luck and skill, generally accepted under the category of “race-games with imperfect information”, and to a certain localisation from Mesopotamia to Greece through the south coast of the Mediterranean Sea. These limits come from the natural evolution and influences we can see on various levels regarding the civilisation that lived in the area known as “Near East” for two thousand years. Of course, they were also influences coming from outside this area and for board-games the influence of India must not be devaluated. However, it seemed more constructive to us to try to do a synthetic work on populations who shared a certain way of living, depending on geographical, political and religious influences, by the study of their representations of board games.

Why board games? Because after old civilisations stopped playing directly on the floor with bones or balls, they thought about constituting an independent surface devoted to the action of playing, a surface which could contain some of their ideas of the world. Even the most simple board, as soon as it is an action of playing with a representation, is an expression of the mental conception of the people who used it and thanks to it were able to take some distance from their environment.

Of course, we do not consider that all the Ancients were intellectuals, involved in strategy and numbers, interpreting the world from a board game. Many of them must have considered this practice like a diversion from the normal life. Even so, it was clear for some of them, that the people who invented those games had a precise vision of the whole world and of the general laws of its constitution. Evidence of this fact are given by the relationship between the number of squares and the instruments of random, and the localisation of special squares according to the difficulty of certain throws (that people were enjoying in their practice of the games).

For us it is very interesting to study old board-games through the angle of representations because board-games received complex meanings apparently from the start : their utility has not much to do with economy and wealth creation ; their practice is not reserved to a certain kind of people and at the same time each social category could find something different in the knowledge of their practice. We understand the word “representation” as the expression of a mental process dealing with the organisation of images with codified signs and associations. Therefore, a sign is the expression of an abstract idea and part of a system of conceptualisation. The evolution observed in the evolution of the systems of representation in the Antiquity demonstrates a continuity with local variations. Thus, because the life of our board-games was apparently not limited neither in space nor in time since we think it is possible to find a continuity in two thousand years of board-games in the Near East, it could be useful to analyse the system of signs they developed during that period. In order to show this continuity we will limit our subject to the most spread out families of board-games in this area :

-The game of Game of Thirty squares, the Game of Mehen and the Game of Twenty squares which are sometimes represented on both sides of the same board.

-The Game of Fifty eight Holes, for its diffusion among almost all the civilisations of this geographic area.

-The board-games of archaic Greece, despite the fact that archaeological resources are desperately lacking for this area, the importance of iconographical and literary evidence could be useful to show the continuity in the practice of those objects.

In order to explain our views on this subject, we will consider this topic following three successive aspects.

First the iconography related to board-games, containing tools and shapes, instruments of games, design of squares and drawings decorating them as well as the iconography of players in situation.

Secondly, we will try to demonstrate the continuity in the spiritual representations involved in board games, considering the meaning of the action of playing on a board through the evidence that can be found both in paintings and in literature.

Finally, we will endeavour to seek an explanation to certain behaviours of the old Near Eastern civilisations through the social use they made of board-games in various fields such as education, politics, war or hunting.

I. Iconography

Our documentation starts almost with the beginning of History since the oldest examples we know come from the first dynasties of Egypt and Mesopotamia (3000-2700 BC). Their iconography was already well structured and it is proof for us that the practice of board-games was quite ancient by this time.

From the beginning, we have to deal with boards decorated with representations of animals (as for example in the Royal Cemetery of Ur) and the use of symbolic representations for special squares. The rosette which is the most constant drawing shown in old board-games can be regarded as the stylised image of several gods, depending on the animals coming along with this symbol : The Great-god with the Bull (Tesub, Adad or Hadad), the goddess of fertility with the sacred tree or the goat (Isthar or Innana) or the Sun with the Lion or the star (Plate I, fig. 1).

Of course, such significations can be regarded as artistic conventions and might not have much to do with the spirit of the game. The explanation given by Irvin Finkel about the Babylonian Tablet shows that a relation could have existed between the rules and the religious beliefs of those rosettes. Many representations of animals can be found in games of various type either on their own or as part of a hunt scene. Two of the games coming from the Royal Tomb of Ur (2600-2500 BC) show us a few scenes with couples of animals (lions and gazelles), represented fighting or in a more majestic way.(Plate I, fig. 2) The example from Tell Halaf represents on both sides of the board stylised-figures of a bull and hunters (Early Assyrian). We know ,also from Assyrian pieces, a few representations of wild beast or even an example of a winged lion (Plate I, fig. 3). One of the most interesting example is a fragmentary Game of Twenty squares, decorated on three sides with two bulls on each side of a rosette with eight petals, characteristic of the conventions of Assyrian art (Plate I, fig. 4).

If we analyse those examples with the several representations of the snake “MHN” in the Egyptian art which shows that the representation of animals can even give both its form and

its name to a board or the animals illustrating the composition of the Greek heroes playing their board-game, we must consider this phenomenon as the expression of an iconography expressing some meaning in relation with games.

Although we still wonder whether those animals were the expression of religious beliefs or the evocation of a certain way of life, we can see that the game is almost never an expression of itself ; its deepest function is to be linked with other activities of any kind , to be an illustration of something else which could find an allegoric expression in the practice of the game.

The tools used in the realisation of those objects are also very interesting since they tell us about the role of aesthetics in achieving a more meaningful purpose. Even if we do not have clear evidence about whether board-games were some kind of religious amulet or astrological table to predict the future, when they are found in a burial situation, it is enough to think that they were seen as a precious object for the journey of the dead.

Many examples are inlaid with rare materials, even if for some of them their poor present state of conservation only allows hypothetical reconstructions. One good example is given by the thirty squares made in steatite inlaid with lapis-lazuli, which has been analysed by Needler(Plate II, fig. 9 and 9a). We do not have the board which was probably made of wood but we can see with the squares the attention put in the realisation of luxurious boards.

All the board-games of the race category have the common rule for the end of the game: the winner is the one who manages to take all his pieces out. According to that we can remark that in the three kind of games we are dealing with, this goal is emphasised by a special representation and sometimes with an inlay of rare material.

From the XVIIIth dynasty, in Egyptian religion, the representations of the national board-game "SNT" seemed to become more complicated : iconographical representations of the journey of the dead through the thirty houses of his judgement are of incredible interest ; we can see that squares and mythological representations found a natural complementarity even in their simplistic form. Some very elaborate examples are decorated on all the squares. But more often, only the last five squares bore drawings. However, the practice of the game was possible even without them and it was easy to remember their meaning in the game. But on most New Empire boards, those squares were carefully decorated with divinities, animals, humans, or symbols.

The shape of the board is also important in regard of the meaning of its practice : symbolisation of liver-model, reproduction of anthropoid or animal forms, representations of houses or geometric designs, most boards are easily recognisable as part of a family. Some variations occurred : the design of the main avenue in the Game of Twenty squares ; the shape of the body and the addition of an upper part in the Game of Fifty eight Holes. Nevertheless, the continuity is quite remarkable for such a long period of time. The best example is the Game of Thirty squares which shows an unmodified pattern of 3x10 during all his Egyptian history, and which can also be identified, exactly identical, in Middle Cypriot Age and in Byblos in the Late Bronze Age.(Plate I, fig. 5) One can notice that those examples show that the game could be played without the special markings at the end of the board.

Remarks : can we see clear correspondences between the board, its representation, and the action it allows to simulate? The signification of the action of playing on a board needs precise rules and meanings appropriate to the most representative beliefs of the society ; a war or a hunt game need to have signs which increase the value of the transfer the player can make from his reality to the miniature representation of it. Therefore, artists had several restraints: the size of the board which did not yield much room for representations and the

shape of the board which had to remain classical enough to be recognised at first sight. For us it must be pointed out that the craftsmen who created those boards had in mind all those aspects. We can see a good example of that in the Neo-Assyrian fragmentary board found at Ras el Aïn, on the border between Turkey and Syria (Plate II, fig. 6). We can admire on the edge of a board designed for the Game of the Fifty Holes, a scene representing a character shooting with a bow from his chariot at full gallop in direction of a prisoner running away and imploring his misery. The making of this decoration had to take into account the very small space left due to the dimension of the board, and also of course its meaning in relation to the game.

Thus we think that a systematic research on the subject of iconographical representation could reveal valuable new details for our attempt in knowing old board-games better.

II. Spirituality

By studying iconography we naturally reach the theme of spirituality. We have a better documentation on Egyptian and Greek considerations about religion since both texts and paintings have been studied by many scholars ; we know less about Mesopotamian and Assyrian mental representations, but we think that even this little knowledge might be enough to parallel the signification of their board-games with those of other civilisations.

First of all, the context of excavations of those objects is an evidence of the continuity of a certain meaning ; for us it is clear that the board-game was a way of interpreting signs for those who were scared about their life after death ; many boards have been discovered in tombs with the diagram in direction of the floor. It is the case for the Ur boards, for some of the Mehen examples, and for some of the reversible boards found in Egyptian tombs on which we can notice that the hieroglyphs are readable when the Game of Thirty squares design is facing down(Plate II, fig. 7). We may interpret this fact as an endeavour to simulate the communication made possible by the board for users between the world of life and a mysterious netherworld.

We know that in the religious conception of Mesopotamian people, Hell was a land from which you could not come back, located far in the West. We may interpret some of the designs of their board-games as an expression of the idea that the dead needed help in his dangerous travel in that unknown direction symbolised in the design of the board by the choice between two possible directions to take out the pieces at the end of the game. Because they were almost alike, they could have represented a kind of divination to interpret the best way to go from one world to the other.(Plate II, fig. 8) The decoration of the boards from Ur shows some symmetry in the symbols and perhaps this “geometry” was in relation with some religious beliefs. It is interesting to compare them to those coming from Egypt with their multiplication of symbolic meanings at the end of the board. However, at the same time the board from Egypt were much more simple in their decoration and the symbols are apparently more connected with the rules of the game than with its hypothetical religious meaning. Nevertheless, in both civilisations those boards could be seen as an expression of the travel of the dead soul through the netherworld. The house of Horus, the thirtieth square, in the Game of Senet was connected with the idea that after having been justified by the judges, the soul of the deceased was taken to heaven by a falcon in the solar-ship of Re-Amun (Plate II, fig. 10), and even the name of the game “passing” is one of the oldest cultural particularity of the Egyptian tradition. Kendall has developed this idea with very persuasive evidence and sums it up as follows :

The encounters of a player with his opponent were seen as the encounters of his soul with the evil or inimical forces that lurked in the nether regions, and his victory was the attainment of the happy afterlife. A loss on the other hand, would seem to have meant utter annihilation and death without redemption. Now, more than ever, senet sets were buried with the dead not only for amusement but, more importantly perhaps, as symbols of their hoped-for resurrection and the difficult road to Paradise that was thought to lie before them.

We know the great place devoted to moral rules in the ancient Egyptian society; we all have in mind the image of the pair of scales deciding whether the heart of the deceased was able to enter paradise after his judgement in front of truth and justice symbolised by Maât. We also know that from the New Kingdom, texts about Senet began to take the place of the actual board, which up to then had usually been placed in tombs to accompany the deceased on his journey to paradise. We linked up these facts with the 17th chapter of the “Book of the Dead”, a sort of compilation of all the magical spellings useful to the dead in order to guarantee his success.

However, we know that a game of chance always come with some people trying to deny its reality and necessity ; considering this fact, we think that a very deep mental structure of Egyptian religion and spirit comes to light with what we know of Senet. By the time of the New Kingdom, Senet was probably used in every single social class. Good players could have represented the cleverest part of it, or in religious conception the purest. Interestingly, we know that for Egyptians amulets and spellings were of great use to go over the final judgement. We do not know whether it is the cast of the priest which introduced Senet in the ritual of eschatology or if it must be seen as an eccentricity of some addictive players victims of their superstition or of their love for board games. Both might be the expression that Senet could have been of great comfort for those who knew how to play well or even how to cheat, to think they could reverse decisions of gods and forced them to admit their soul in paradise. It must have brought ancient Egyptians great reassurance to act out and divine the afterlife and know they might still live with Re in heaven after death no matter what sins they had committed in life. As Piccione sums up :

At the most the game indicates that ancient Egyptians believed they could join the god of the rising sun, Re-Horakty, in a mystical union even before they died. At the least, senet shows that, while still living, Egyptians felt they could actively influence the inevitable afterlife judgement of their soul .

In the same range of idea, we can try to analyse the meaning of board-games representations in Greek paintings. About more than a hundred of ceramics, be they black or red-figures (and even bilingual ones), use the topic of the confrontation of two Greek warriors around a board-game.

Most of them occur in a war context and represent Achilles and Ajax absorbed in the game (Plate III, fig. 12-13), sometimes with Athena between them (Plate III, fig. 14-15). Iconographic details are of great value and a very close research ought to be done on this subject. In that purpose, a large number of scholars tried to interpret this topic in relation to what we know of epic or tragic literature. The other side of those ceramics represent diverse motifs and is also useful in our attempt of comprehension. In most of them, a relation could be seen with the spiritual meaning involved in the practice of gaming. For example, Athena can be seen as the goddess of war as well as of cleverness and strategy. Dionysos is related to ritual festivities, the signification of the tragedy in archaic Greece, death of course, but also

victory in war. The character of Herakles is interpreted usually in keeping with the fight against chaos and the organisation of civilisation (gigantomachy or battles against Amazons). A very interesting explanation of this popular motif is given by J. Boardman. The first element of his demonstration concerns the fact that Ajax became an honorary Athenian with Salamis annexed and the Salaminioi part of the citizen body, which was going to give its name to one of the new tribes of the democracy. Before that, Peisistratos' return to Attica in 546 had been an embarrassing and shaming episode for an Athens which had long been free from the tyrant's family. The author thinks that Exekias might have used this episode related by Herodotus in relation with the idea that the two heroes Achilles and Ajax had been surprised in the Troy battlefield by a sudden attack while they were absorbed in their game. The other side of the ceramic shows the "Dioskouroi" which are well known as symbols of anti-tyrannical spirit. It could, then, be some sort of political propaganda as Boardman says :

Pride was injured and the best balm to sore pride is the example of others and betters who had suffered in the same way but survived. If Exekias' attitude to tyranny in Athens was anything like we have suspected from his use of other myth scenes and heroic figures, he would have been very likely to promote a mythical parable-normal procedure in commenting on a contemporary dilemma-which might both comfort and give warning that, in the face of tyranny and defeat, survival lies in the alert" .

For other commentators the explanation could be linked with divination (heroes seen as able to discuss with the gods to discover their fate), with mythology (as part as the Trojan cycle) or with virtue and education given by heroic examples. We do not know much about Greek board-games and paradoxically we have more literary evidence than archaeological evidence. Nevertheless it is possible to interpret the inscriptions coming with the representation, along with the context and what we know about the presumed fate of these two heroes ; for us there is a possibility that artists wanted to express the tragic quality of their life, and at the same time the great memory of their acts, by the use of their confrontation with a board-game. Thus, Greek artists might have been influenced by Egyptian considerations on this topic, and might merely have changed the meaning, in order to adapt it to Greek conceptions of death and memory. This way, these scenes become an expression of the tragedy of everybody's fate symbolised by Chance and ignorance, and of the attempt of Greek mythological heroes to compare their forces with the Gods. However it is worth noticing that the context in which the Greek and Egyptian representations of players were born is really different. In the latter it is the ritualistic and peaceful impression which dominates, whereas with the Greeks the clothes, the weapons, and the tension perceptible between the players confer a much more violent expression to those scenes.

Remarks : There is much to say about relations between religion and board games, if we consider that the latter are made in the purpose of simulating both the real life and the cosmic forces, which are in charge of organising it. It is for us of great value to research in different civilisations all the details we could find about the religious meanings, involved in board-games, for two opposite reasons : because they teach us a lot about the representation of the relations between human beings and their gods and the fear of death and judgement related to each civilisation. Moreover, they show us that maybe ancient people were not that much scared of life after death and that they could play with their judgement and even cheat. These practice could even be an expression of how they had succeeded in taking their fate into their own hands thanks to the help of board games.

III. Society.

From the idea that board-games are human inventions which are always in relation with the level of development of each particular society, many scholars have distinguished games of luck and games of intelligence. To our point of view, considering the history of games mixing skill and chance, such an evolution must be examined in details.

We know from the Von Neumann and Morgentsen's Theory of Games that a rationalistic behaviour could appear in the actions of gamblers. Most of them will choose the middle strategy which offers minimum risk and average gain. It is, of course, impossible to know whether the ancient players had in mind strategic considerations based on mathematics or only an agonistic spirit based on beliefs and psychological experiences. Whatever we think, it is obvious that their use of board-games was somewhere motivated by practical reasons. As an instrument to visualise movement and space, as a material to illustrate concrete situations or abstract choices, as a training for quick decisions and a good capacity of adaptation, old board-games mixing chance and skill were regarded as an essential of everybody's culture.

First of all, we must consider what accepting rules coming from outside could have represented for various players. Board-games are a good witness of a social order symbolised by a simulation reflecting the attempt of kings to organise society with laws and codes. Rules are the condition of the game. For a child it is a new experience to accept to play a game with determinate laws. For humans it may have represented an allegory of the cosmic laws or for religious people, an expression of the mysterious decisions of the gods. In any ways, board-games play a key role in social order because they allow individuals to represent themselves among their peers, and to test their forces against somebody else in a pacific way.

Ideas like this one are very difficult to base on scientific evidence since we know very little about the motivations of the ancient players. But, nowadays, physical theories, in their attempt of increasing our knowledge of the world, use many laws relating to chance, movements and probabilities. We often consider that physics started with the Greek philosophers and their thoughts about numbers and elements. In one of the fragments of Heraclites, we can see that he compared Time with a child playing with dice. In Plato and Aristotle's writings we can find some quotations about the chance and board-games played in their time. We know that for Athenians, chance was one of the major conditions of democracy since it enabled every citizen to pretend to a political power.

Such examples give us an idea of the illustration of the fight between skill and chance in the constitution of a social order. "Paideia" in Greek means both education and game. The context of representations in Egypt let us think that moral considerations were involved in its practice. Kings of civilisations like the Assyrian or the Egyptian had to show their courage and their cleverness to justify their power. War, Hunt or special relations with the gods were representations of it. Likewise, we think that board-games could have represented in those societies, a symbolisation of those qualities.

To take this example further we know that kings of the Old-Kingdom in Egypt used to love wild beast hunting. Their value and the justification of their power was unquestionable because they were protected directly by powerful gods. However, they may have wished to confirm their superiority by showing their opponents that even chance was on their side. They could also have enjoyed some victories for which they did not have to risk their life ; as a sort of training, or some kind of god like testimonies to their actions. All the examples of hunt scenes decorating board-games and also the one in which we can see an Assyrian warrior (a

king?) riding a chariot and pursuing an enemy or an animal, could be interpreted as tales to commemorate the great memory of their figures. It was easier for the common man to try to demonstrate his virtue in a game than to have to do it in the context of a war. We must also wonder why we almost never can see gaming scenes decorating board-games(apart from the Egyptian board stored in Le Louvre (Plate III, fig. 16)on which we can see the owner of the tomb playing Senet with one of his servants).

Conclusion

In conclusion we will try to sum up the different aspects by which we have tried to study the board-games of the Ancient civilisations.

Our documentation is both very rich because we can use every kind of tools from rare objects to literary documents, and very dangerous because the distance both in time and space between the different examples of old board-games can drive us to abusive considerations and hasty conclusions.

However, we think that the specific nature of our material is to say very little about itself especially because religious meanings are often involved in its representations. Board-games were probably for Ancient people something understandable by everybody and at the same time the deep knowledge of its signification might have been reserved to initiated or powerful people.

For us this iconographical and archeological documentation is a link with the mentality of old civilisations. It is not of major importance not to have precise accounts about the meanings of board-games because one of the motivations of the artists who created those objects or the scenes decorating them implied that they wanted their message to be mysterious and reserved to initiated. It is a challenge for us to be able to think with their eyes, and to leave aside what could be considered today as a player's rationalistic behaviour. Board-games should be seen as an expression of the religious beliefs of the old civilisations as well as their first attempt to stand back from pessimistic views.

The knowledge of probabilities and the experience of playing games were good instruments to consider fate and social order from a different point of view. At the beginning probably only Heroes or semi-divine people were seen as able to play with chance and slowly more and more people started to think that they could even trick the natural order. In Egypt where our documentation is more important, the double meaning of Senet, both an instrument of justice and an amulet for impunity is a perfect example of the paradoxical and complex representations involved in board games, the contemporary economic use of the theory of games being an other one.

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