LATRUNCULI

## A FORGOTTEN ROMAN GAME OF STRATEGY RECONSTRUCTED

by Ulrich Schädler

Perhaps the most sophisticated game of strategy played by the Romans was *Ludus Latrunculorum*, the game of little soldiers. *Latrunculi*, unfortunately, did not survive the end of the Roman Empire. Several attempts have been made to reconstruct its rules based on mentions of it by ancient authors, and often with the help of presumed analogies with other board games like Chess, Draughts, Go, or Seega. The results have been varied. Some of these attempts have indeed been published as games. In 1977 TSR Games came out with *Cohorts – The Game of Roman Checkers* based on the rules reconstructed by E. Falkener in 1892. In Germany a version of the *Ludus Latrunculorum* was conceived and designed by U. Harsch and G. Eger, and has been available since 1988. A few years ago two collections of ancient Roman games, including a version of *Latrunculi*, were put on the German market, one by Anita Rieche (*Römische Spiele. So spielten die Alten Römer*), and the other by the Museumspädagogisches Zentrum Munich (*Antike Spiele*).

According to ancient sources *Latrunculi* must have been a game of strategy at which it was possible to acquire considerable skill. This is indicated by the fact that many people came to watch the play of the Roman senator Cnaeus Calpurnius Piso. From Varro (116-27 BC), who is the earliest reference to the game, we learn that it was played on a board marked by orthogonally intersecting lines in which the figures were moved on the squares between these lines. Several gaming boards of this kind have come to light from the ancient world. Some of them have been found in Roman sites in Britain: boards of 7 x 7, 8 x 8 and 9 x 10 squares are preserved in the museum in Chesters, and a board with 7 x 8 squares has been found in Corbridge. On three fragments of similar boards from Richborough we can discern 7 x 10, 7 x 6 and 8 x 5 squares. In Dover a stone block with 9 x 10 squares has been excavated. An 8 x 8 board comes from Chedworth, and boards with an identical number of squares can be seen on the steps of the Parthenon in Athens and in the Basilica Iulia in Rome. A roof tile from Exeter also exhibits 8 x 8 squares, while one scratched in a roof tile in Mainz has 9 x 9 squares. We can conclude, therefore, that the number of squares was not definitely determined, although boards of 8 x 8 squares seem to have been normal. Consequently, the number of pieces must have varied, too.

More about the game can be traced from several verses by Ovid, from Martial's epigrams, and from *Laus Pisonis*, a poem by an unknown author dedicated to the above-mentioned Piso. All these date from the first century AD. These authorities tell us that each of the two players had different colored pieces, black and white, for example. We never hear of distinct types of pieces, either with different modes of movement or with inferior or superior powers. Different names for the pieces, such as *miles, latro, bellator*, and so on, are due to the poets' attempts to avoid repetitions of the same word. This is confirmed by archaeological evidence. Thousands of hemispherical or flat

Latrunculi *board scratched into the surface of a stone slab, found in Chesters (UK), now in the Chesters Museum*
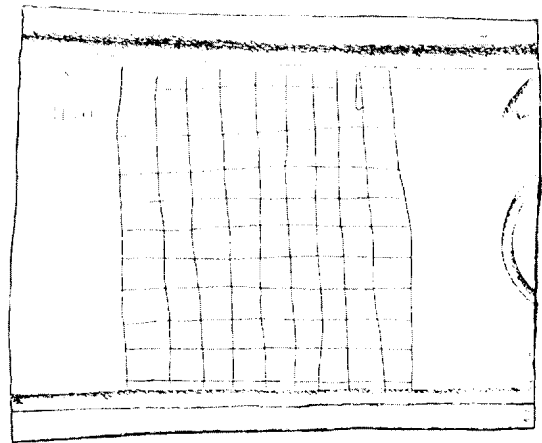
Latrunculi *board scratched into a roof tile found in Mainz (Germany), now in the Landesmuseum, Mainz*

gaming counters made of glass, bone, ceramic, and other material have hitherto been found at archaeological sites all over the Roman world. They do not indicate that there existed any distinction between the pieces in any Roman board game. The pieces moved forward and backward, and I suppose sideways, too, for otherwise it would not make a playable game. The pieces were captured by surrounding one enemy piece by two pieces in rank or file. In contrast to Reversi, only single pieces could be captured, while two or more stones in a row were safe: "One piece falls before a double foe," says Ovid (Art of Love III 358, translated by J H Mozley).

We can draw further conclusions concerning the beginning of the game, the movement of the pieces, and the method of capture. The author of the *Laus Pisonis* describes the beginning of the game with the following words: "Cunningly the pieces are disposed on the open board, and battles are fought with soldiery of glass, so that now

white captures black, now black captures white" (translated by R G Austin). As in most of the other sources referring to *Latrunculi*, the game is described using military terminology comparing the game to a battle. Surprisingly, the author of the poem does not indicate any formation of the troops, although it was a constant and most important part of Greek and Roman military tactics to arrange the legions and auxiliary troops before the battle started. This can be seen in ancient works such as Arrian's report about Alexander's campaigns, Caesar's *De bello gallico*, and Frontinus' book on strategy. Concerning the beginning of the game, we can conclude, therefore, that there was no initial order of the pieces as it is known in Chess or Draughts. Obviously the pieces were placed on "the open board" on any vacant square, and the game proper started when all the pieces had been placed, just as R C Bell analogously supposed for the North African game of Seega, or Kharbga.

Both Ovid and the author of the *Laus Pisonis* describe the difficult maneuver of bringing back a piece that had been moved forward too far. Ovid reports "how the different coloured soldier marches forth in a straight line, when a piece caught between two adversaries is imperilled, how one advancing may be skilful to attack and rescue a piece moved forward, and retreating may move safely not uncovered" (Tristia II 477-480, after the translation by S G Owen). Two conclusions can be made from the efforts required to rescue an isolated piece standing far from the others. Firstly, the pieces could probably not be moved more than one square at a time, for it would be relatively easy to draw a piece back, if the rook's move was allowed. Secondly, the maneuver described consists of advancing a second piece to rescue the first moved too far forward by retreating together. This is a surprising method. Does the second piece not block the first on its way back? It seems perfectly clear that this move works only if the two pieces could leap over one another because only in this way do they not stand in each other's way and never loose contact.

Captured pieces were taken off the board: in the *Laus Pisonis* it is said, that Piso's "hands rattle with the crowd of pieces." Their number must therefore have been considerable, perhaps twice or three times the number of squares that made the width of the board, i.e., for each player, 16 – 24 pieces on an 8 x 8 or 8 x 9 board, and 14 – 21 on a 7 x 7 or 7 x 8 board, or about ½ or ¾ the number of squares on the board, respectively. But the captured enemies were not immediately taken off! As the Roman philosopher Seneca (Letters 117,30; 1st century AD) states, it was possible to determine "how the surrounded stone could go out." What else can this mean, other than the capturing position was set up first, but not before the next turn was one allowed to remove the piece from the board, instead of moving another piece? Thus capturing an enemy stone was always connected with the loss of a turn. Maybe this is the meaning of the phrase in the *Laus Pisonis*, "Another courts blockade on either flank, and, under feint of being blocked, himself blocks two men." This delay gave the opponent the possibility to look for a way out. But how? One possibility could have been to blockade one of the two surrounding pieces, provided there was a rule that a piece surrounded by two enemies could no longer form part of a blockade itself. In addition, in similar games of strategy you generally try to threaten one of the opponent's pieces in another part of the board, so that he has to decide whether to capture your piece and loose one of his own in turn, or whether to defend and rescue his own piece. We do not know whether suicide was allowed, but probably it was not.

Try to play *Latrunculi* with the following rules. Use a normal checkerboard with 8 x 8 squares. The two players agree about the number of pieces, at least 16, but not more than 24, for each player. If the board is larger, the number of pieces increases, too. Use counters in which the sides are differentiated, such as coins or hemispheres.

1. The players take turns to place one piece on any vacant square. According to Bishop Isidore of Sevilla (Origines, chapter 64; 7" century AD) these pieces were called *vagi*. In this phase no captures are made.

2. When all the pieces have been placed, the players take turns to move pieces on the board. The pieces can be moved orthogonally to any adjacent square. Isidore called these pieces *ordinarii*. A piece can leap over any single piece of either color, if the square behind is unoccupied. Several leaps in one turn are possible (as in draughts).

3. If a player can trap an enemy piece between two friendly pieces, the enemy piece is blocked and cannot be moved. Such a piece is called *alligatus* or, according to Isidore, *incitus*. To make it clear that a piece is an *alligatus*, it is turned upside down.

4. In his next turn, instead of moving a piece, the player can capture the trapped piece by removing it from the board, provided his own two surrounding pieces are still free. A trapped piece is immediately free if one of its two enemies is itself surrounded.

5. A player can move a piece between two enemies ("suicide") only if by this move one of the two is trapped.

6. A player reduced to only one piece left on the board has lost the game.
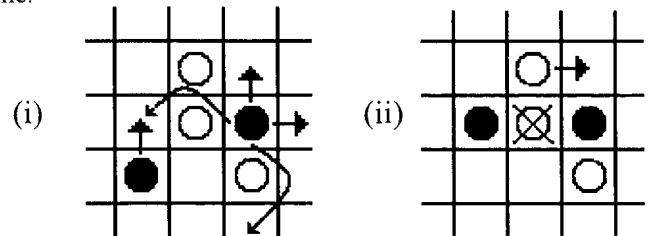
(i) *The white piece is in danger of being trapped if the black piece on the left moves one step forward. Indicated are also the possible moves of the black piece on the right. (ii) White traps the black piece on the right, so his own piece, which was trapped in Black's previous move, will be free again.*
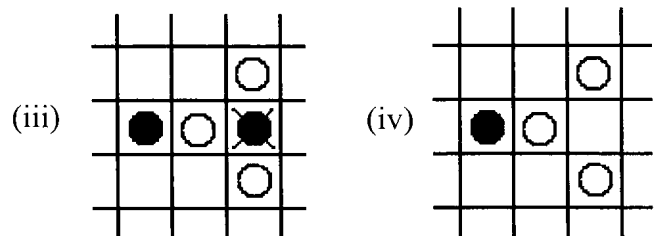
(iii) *Black has enclosed the white piece in the middle, but by trapping the black piece on the right White has set his piece free again. (iv) In his next turn White captures the black piece by removing it from the board.*

The author is interested in feedback concerning readers' experiences with these rules. Write to Dr. Ulrich Schädler, Marsstraße 44, D-46509 Xanten, Germany; e-mail: UUSchaedler@t-online.de.

Reference: Ulrich Schädler, Latrunculi ein verlorenes strategisches Brettspiel der Römer, in: Homo Ludens. Der spielende Mensch IV, 1994, 47-66; English summary on p. 67. ∎

Dr. Schädler has a doctorate in Greek and Roman Archaeology. He has been involved in many archeological excavations and has published numerous articles on ancient and modern board games, both in the German game magazine Spielbox and various academic publications. He is co-editor of the magazine Board Games Studies. – Ed.