



REVIEW
ANCIENT EGYPTIANS AT PLAY:
BOARD GAMES ACROSS BORDERS

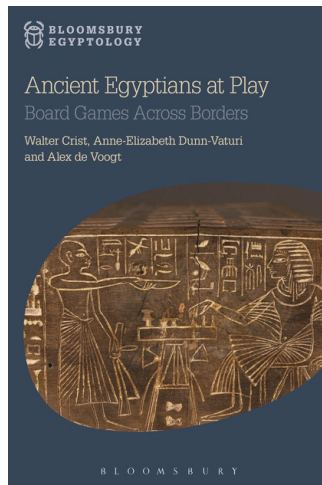
by Walter Crist, Anne-Elizabeth Dunn-Vaturi, and Alex de Voogt
Bloomsbury, London, 2016

Reviewed by Margaret Geoga,
Brown University

Walter Crist, Anne-Elizabeth Dunn-Vaturi, and Alex de Voogt's *Ancient Egyptians at Play: Board Games Across Borders* is a comprehensive study of board games in Egypt and beyond, from the Predynastic to the Islamic periods. The study provides a thorough summation of all available material evidence and helpful discussions of previous scholarship on the topic. The authors argue convincingly that board games from outside Egypt and from after the pharaonic period must be studied alongside

pharaonic Egyptian games in order to inspire interest from scholars in other disciplines, as well as to deepen Egyptologists' understanding of how board games functioned within Egypt and across borders.

The temporal and geographical range of material evidence of game play in the ancient world has made board games an appealing topic of study to scholars from a variety of disciplines. Game boards and playing pieces are attested in the Egyptian archaeological record as early as the late Naqada period and consistently throughout the pharaonic and post-pharaonic periods. They have been found throughout Egypt, and evidence of Egyptian games is attested outside of Egypt as well. Material evidence for game play consists of boards, playing



pieces, and randomization devices. Game boards may be portable or incised on rock faces, monuments, or ostraca. Playing pieces have been found with and without an accompanying board. When found in isolation, they may point to the previous existence of an accompanying board that has not survived. Like playing pieces, randomization devices such as throwing sticks, astragali, teetotums, and dice may aid in the identification of a game, as well as help in the dating process. In addition to the game components,

images of game boards and game play are a valuable source of information to scholars seeking to identify games and playing pieces, particularly when playing pieces are found in isolation. Finally, textual evidence, consisting of religious texts, captions of daily life scenes in tombs, and the Great Game Text of the New Kingdom, offers information about the social and religious context of board games in ancient Egypt.

The authors' main goal in their study is to synthesize the evidence described above, as well as expand the scope of study to include other areas of the ancient world and post-pharaonic time periods. The study is not intended as a catalog of attested game boards and playing pieces, but rather as a synthesis of previous scholarly work on board

games that builds on this work “by expanding the scope spatially and chronologically,” due to the large number of Egyptian games attested outside of Egypt (p. 2). The expanded scope includes Egyptian games found in the Levant and Cyprus, as well as games of foreign origin found in Egypt and throughout the ancient Near East. In addition, the authors discuss Roman, Arab, and Ottoman games discovered in Egypt, which have often been excluded from Egyptological studies of board games. The expanded scope of the study allows for a comparative approach that highlights board games as a form of cultural exchange across “linguistic, political, socio-economic and religious boundaries” (p. 168). The authors’ inclusion of time periods and geographical areas that are often excluded from Egyptological studies of board games also has the advantage of making the study useful to scholars in other disciplines, such as Classics and anthropology.

While the scope of material evidence is broader than in previous studies of board games, the authors have limited the scope of types of evidence to be considered. Rather than reinterpreting the “well-documented and sometimes contentious texts” that discuss board games, the authors “summarize earlier arguments made from textual evidence,” while focusing their efforts on illuminating new parallels among the broader set of material evidence (p. 3). Although the authors convincingly explain their choice to limit their scope primarily to material evidence, there are moments when further textual context would be welcome, for example in discussions of the Great Game Text, which is summarized in just a few sentences early on and subsequently mentioned several times without a lot of detail. As a result of the authors’ choice to focus on material evidence, they are able to maintain a clear focus on the spread of board games into and out of ancient Egypt, without becoming embroiled in philological debates that may distract from the goal of this study.

The introduction includes a list of major scholarly works on Egyptian board games and a description of how the study of board games has progressed since the mid-19th century. The list is organized by type of study, such as studies of the ritual context of game play or catalogs of boards and texts. The authors stress that while many previous studies have focused on the religious significance of games and the rules of play, they seek to study board games as evidence of cross-cultural interaction. Therefore, previous scholarship on these issues is summarized, rather than critiqued or evaluated. Following the list of studies in the introduction, the authors address relevant scholarship in more detail as

needed in the body of the work. The authors’ discussions of previous studies of board games provide helpful context to the discovery of the evidence under consideration, as well as the scholarly debates surrounding its interpretation. In addition, the authors note that their study goes beyond previous scholarship in that it includes newly found games that have not yet been published or discussed by other scholars of ancient board games. The fact that the authors’ engagement with other scholarship remains primarily descriptive, however, means that it is not always clear how their views fit into ongoing scholarly debates.

Following the introduction, the chapters of the book are divided by game and organized roughly chronologically. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss games of Egyptian origin, primarily *mehen* and *senet*, as well as several other games that are less well attested. Chapter 2 is organized by types of evidence, beginning with a detailed description of all attested *mehen* boards from Egypt, followed by a similarly systematic description of all attested *mehen* pieces. A later section on textual evidence for *mehen* gives an overview of captions of tomb scenes and Pyramid Texts that mention the game. The discussion of the Pyramid Texts is compelling, if somewhat hurried due to the difficulty of striking a balance between outlining all previous scholarship on the issue and refraining from going into too much detail about the textual evidence. The section on the social context of the game presents conclusions that are convincing and restrained, thanks to the authors’ acknowledgment of the limitations imposed by the comparatively small amount of available evidence. The final sections of the chapter trace *mehen* through Nubia, the Levant, and Cyprus and explore the game’s social context outside Egypt. Chapter 3 is organized chronologically, with each section including material, pictorial, and textual evidence. Since more is known about *senet* than about *mehen*, this chapter delves deeper into dating issues, trends in the decoration of game boards, and the religious significance of *senet*, as suggested in Old Kingdom tomb reliefs, several Coffin Texts, the Book of the Dead, and the Great Game Text. More *senet* game boards are attested outside of Egypt than *mehen* boards, allowing the authors to draw more developed conclusions about the mechanisms of the game’s spread from Egypt to Nubia, the Levant, and Cyprus, as well as about the various contexts in which the game was played in these areas.

Chapter 4 breaks out of the roughly chronological organization of the book and discusses the Game of Twenty. The chapter begins with an overview of the

game's suspected origins in the Indus Valley, its spread to Mesopotamia, and the evolution of its decoration before its transmission to Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period. The question of the date and method of the game's arrival in Egypt is raised in the following sections, followed by a detailed description of all attested boards. Board decorations are given their own section, complete with a helpful table of all attested markings, as well as their dates and provenance. The chapter ends with two sections discussing the game's social context in Egypt, the Levant, and Cyprus.

The next chapter discusses the Egyptian game Hounds and Jackals and returns to the chronological sequence of the book, as well as the organizational structure of chapter 2. A list of all attested boards, most of which date to the Middle Kingdom, is followed by a list of known gaming pegs and a description of paintings of the game being played at Beni Hasan. The richest section of the chapter describes the game's spread outside Egypt as far north as Anatolia and as far east as Iran, making Hounds and Jackals the most well-traveled Egyptian board game. This section includes an examination of the possibilities of how the game traveled from Egypt to Anatolia, as well as an interesting discussion of recent interpretations of Sumerian proverbs that may in fact refer to Hounds and Jackals. This chapter's discussion of the religious and social contexts of the game is comparatively brief and suggests the game was linked to the concept of rebirth and played by members of all social classes.

The sixth and seventh chapters discuss Roman, Arab, and Ottoman games, which are often excluded from Egyptological literature. The authors argue that it is important to include these later games in part because these games are often found as graffiti on pharaonic-era monuments, which makes knowledge of these later games essential to efforts to identify and date them. As the authors stress in these chapters, the presence of a graffiti game on pharaonic architecture "does provide a *terminus post quem* for the date of the game, but does not imply the

game was played at the same time the building was built, or even in use" (p. 151). This important point is mentioned several times earlier in the study but is particularly emphasized in the chapters on games that often postdate by many centuries the monuments on which they are inscribed. The final chapter provides a succinct summary of the large set of evidence described in the previous chapters. This summary is organized chronologically, rather than by game, which helps the reader understand more broadly the evolution and spread of Egyptian board games. This chapter also includes preliminary conclusions, which merit further study, explaining the mechanisms of and reasons for the spread of board games into and out of Egypt.

Ancient Egyptians at Play is a thoroughly researched overview of the evidence of board games in ancient Egypt and the ancient world. The study incorporates evidence not often considered by Egyptologists, namely games found in Nubia, Cyprus, and the Levant, as well as games found in Egypt dating to post-pharaonic periods. Since the study is more literature review and description of material evidence than analysis, it is not always clear how substantively the authors contribute to ongoing scholarly debates about board games. In addition, more cohesive organization, both within individual sections and in the sequencing of the chapters, would make the compilation of such a wide range of evidence by several authors more accessible. The study's greatest strength is the compelling case the authors make for the necessity of including foreign, Roman, Arab, and Ottoman games in order to further our understanding of Egyptian board games and how they functioned as a form of cross-cultural interaction. Egyptologists and scholars from other disciplines who wish to study board games in the ancient world will find this study to be a very useful research tool that provides a thorough description of the available material evidence, summaries of previous work on the topic, and astute suggestions of broader trends and questions that warrant examination in greater depth.