



# Optional workshop: gaming and gambling

Pompeii: The life, death and rediscovery of a Roman town  
(HPAH5078/HPAH6078)



# Our evidence for games and rules

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- Literary sources (vague and imprecise).
  - For Roman period:
    - Ovid, Martial and the *Laus Pisonis* (Saleius Bassus or Lucan?).
- Artistic and archaeological evidence.
  - Depictions, etched boards, material culture.
- Rules not always fixed; dangers of historical “parallels”.
  - Questionable evidence that chess was derived from Roman games like *latrunculi*.

# Games of chance

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- *alea* = games of chance or gambling, including:
  - Dice or “knucklebones” (*tali*)
  - Dice pot (pyrgos; fritillus)
  - Game board (*tabula*; *alveolus*)
  - Counter (*tessera*)

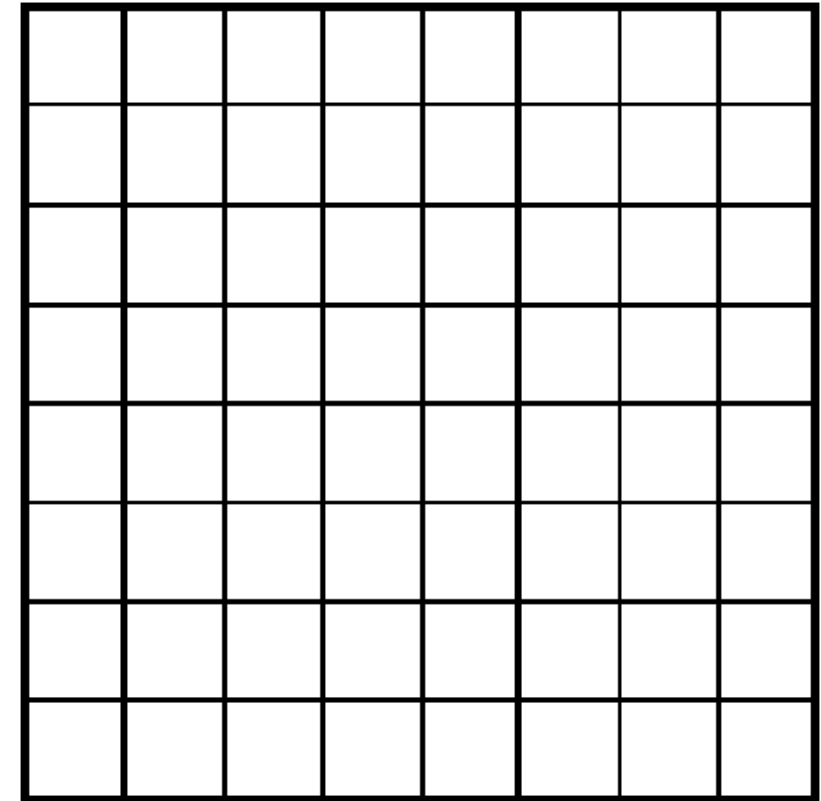


Ivory dice from Pompeii, Naples Archaeological Museum

# *ludus latrunculorum* or *latrunculi*

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- Latrunculi means ‘little soldiers’ or ‘little brigands’:
- “Those were called latrones ‘mercenaries’ from latus ‘side’ who were at the King’s side...” – **Varro *Lingua Latina* 7.52.**
- Similar to earlier Greek game *petteia*.
  - Board marked with lines and spaces – Varro *L.L.* 10.22. Often 8 x 8 or 12 x 8.
  - Pieces (*calculi*, *latrones*, *milites*) often made of glass of different colours
    - Ovid *A.A.* 2.208; *Trist.* 2.477.
  - Pieces taken by being surrounded by two enemies in rank or file
    - Ovid *A.A.* 3.358.
  - Backwards movement of pieces and blocking manoeuvre allowed.
  - Winner is the player who takes the opponent’s *dux* or reduces them to 3 pieces.



# *tabula* = table or board

- Board quite similar to our modern backgammon board.
  - Similar to Egyptian *senet*.
- Each player has 15 pieces;
  - transfer these from one's own entry table to opponent's without getting pieces captured.
- Each piece enters square one and travels counter-clockwise.
- 2 or 3 dice thrown, 1 to 3 pieces must be moved;
  - if possible, up to maximum value of the dice.

