

FACILITATING INTERACTION: BOARD GAMES AS SOCIAL LUBRICANTS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Summary. This re-evaluation of existing data on board games from the Near Eastern Bronze Age demonstrates their function as social lubricants in cross-cultural interaction. Board games are situated theoretically as liminoid practices, which lie outside the bounds of normative social behaviour and allow for interaction across social boundaries. Utilizing double-sided game boards, with an indigenous game on one side and a newly introduced game on the other, the games of senet, mehen and twenty squares provide evidence for social interactions. Cypriots had adopted Egyptian mehen and senet by the third millennium BC, and indigenized the games. This lies in contrast to the game of twenty squares, which had a particular role among elites in the Late Bronze Age interaction sphere. This anthropological discussion of evidence relating to gaming seeks to inspire further research on the role of board games in society.

BOARD GAMES IN ARCHAEOLOGY

The study of board games in the archaeological record has traditionally focused on identifying origins of certain games (Murray 1952; Parlett 1999; Schädler 1995; Sebbane 2001), identifying types (Bell 1960; Caillois 2001 (1961); de Voogt 1995, 9–15; Murray 1952), and documenting their spread across regions (Murray 1913; Townshend 2007). While that research is a first step in understanding the importance of games in ancient societies, an anthropologically informed examination of the roles that board games play in societies is rare. Anthropology has historically focused on other forms of play, such as sports, for which connections between identity and politics are more readily apparent (e.g. Appadurai 1995; Azoy 1982; Fox 1996; Guttman 1994; Hill and Clark 2001). Board games have not received the same amount of scrutiny, but they may offer an avenue for the study of more intimate forms of play.

Within the literature of social lubricants (Bieliński and Taracha 1992; Hall and Forsyth 2011) board games are situated as tools that facilitate interaction between people across social boundaries (kinship, ethnicity, gender, etc.), functioning similarly to the consumption of alcohol and other psychoactive substances in their ability to create liminoid spaces. Once framed as such, double-sided game boards demonstrate the differential patterns of adoption of three games (senet, mehen and

twenty squares) within their archaeological, cultural and historical contexts. These double-sided game boards then point at the types of interaction these games were fostering.

LIMINALITY AND SOCIAL LUBRICANTS

Following the distinctions made by Victor Turner (1982, 32), 'liminoid' is a term describing social practices that 'resemble but are not identical with "liminal"'. Liminality is a state common to liminoid and liminal action whereby people can step outside normal social practices and bend familiar cultural elements and societal structure (Turner 1982, 27), but they are serious acts reproducing the status quo (Turner 1982, 32). The liminoid is distinguished from the liminal in that more freedom is allowed (Turner 1982, 33). It is less serious, and actions are not as proscribed. It can 'generate and store a plurality of alternative models for living ... which are capable of influencing the behavior of those in mainstream social and political roles' (Turner 1982, 33). Thus, these actions do not seek to replicate the status quo through inversion of roles; rather, their goal is to offer new possibilities outside of the norm. Places where liminoid actions are performed can be described as 'an imaginary borderland where boundaries of inclusion and exclusion can be negotiated' (van Wolputte 2010, 93). Liminoid states can be entered through the use of social lubricants.

Liminoid states created by alcohol and other psychoactive substances allow for interaction that would otherwise not be permitted. The physiological effects of psychoactive substances no doubt help to produce liminoid action, as inhibitions are degraded, allowing participants to interact more easily across social boundaries (Bunimovitz and Greenberg 2004; Dietler 1990, 362; 2006; 2010 for numerous examples; Dikötter *et al.* 2004; von Gernet 1995; Hirsch 1995; Hugh-Jones 1995; Sherratt 1987; Weir 1985; van Wolputte 2010). Game play produces an altered state of mind under which similar interaction may be facilitated. Indeed, the description of play as 'a metaphoric sphere that can conjoin what is otherwise apart and divide what is otherwise together, and in a malleable way use these pretended identities to create a feeling of belonging' (Sutton-Smith 1997, 93) indicates processes that are similar to those taking place during social drinking occasions. Sutton-Smith describes a continuum between order and disorder in games (Sutton-Smith 1977), from which new models, symbols and paradigms arise (Turner 1982, 28). Huizinga (1950, 13–14) describes play as being 'outside "ordinary" life' and describes the 'stepping out of common reality' that is apparent in both animal and human play. He describes what he calls the play-mood, a mental process he conflates with religious ecstasy (Huizinga 1950, 17–27), but that nonetheless reflects a liminoid state under which people may interact across social norms. Like drinking occasions, play 'presupposes not solitude but company' (Caillois 2001 (1961), 40).

Board games as social lubricants

The spectrum of play includes different kinds of games that are determined in part by the number of people playing them. Typically, team sports consist of groups playing, frequently accompanied by an even larger number of spectators. Other forms of play, such as card games, involve smaller groups of people in a more intimate setting. Board games provide the most intimate form, as they are almost exclusively played by two people. Board games as opposed to card games are more suitable for archaeological examination because cards are less easily preserved, and are relatively late chronologically (Lo 2004; Parlett 1991, 35).

There are accounts in the literature suggesting that, while in the liminoid state of play, board games allow people to interact across kinship, ethnic and socio-economic boundaries. For instance, it was common among groups in the Horn of Africa (Pankhurst 1971) and South Asia (Townshend 1977, 92; Finkel 2006, 72) for newly married couples to play board games on their wedding night in order to establish familiarity. Driberg (1927, 168) recounts an instance when two different groups in Equatorial Africa came together for trade, and the playing of the board game *choro* served as a social lubricant, turning animosity into 'greatest amity'. Finally, Davies (1925, 137) observed that games served to bring the English into contact with Sudanese Arabs across socio-economic lines, in a context other than that of tax-collection or law enforcement. These ethnographic accounts support the argument that games are employed as social lubricants but archaeological evidence corroborating this argument is lacking.

CULTURAL TRANSMISSION OF BOARD GAMES

It is evident that games travel across cultural boundaries, as the widespread play of board games such as chess, backgammon, pachisi and others demonstrates (Finkel 2004a; 2004b; Lo 2007; Masukawa 2004; Murray 1913; Riddler 1995, 103; Watkins 2007). Two of the authors have addressed this topic in a study focusing on cultural transmission theory as it relates to two of the most popular games from the ancient Near East: twenty squares and fifty-eight holes (de Voogt *et al.* 2013). A number of hypotheses regarding the ways in which the morphology of games changed as they crossed socio-cultural boundaries were tested. It was found that:

1. Games are transmitted with high fidelity.
2. Innovation is not contingent on the complexity of the game.
3. Complex games are often changed more gradually than simple games.
4. Innovations happen when games cross boundaries.
5. Cultural transmission of games is not primarily contingent on conquest.

Archaeological evidence for the transmission of board games in instances of close interaction can be seen in the third millennium BC Levant. At Arad in southern Canaan, 35 examples of the Egyptian game *senet* have been discovered (Sebbane 2001). Appearing on limestone blocks, the diagnostic pattern of *senet* (three rows of ten spaces) is executed either as incised squares, drilled depressions or a combination of both techniques. Other evidence at the site suggests that Arad was an important terminus in the copper trade, and Egyptian artefacts at this site have also been found throughout the region, while imported ceramics in Egypt suggest the acquisition of oil and wine from the Levant (Ilan and Sebbane 1989; Kafafi 2014; Müller 2014; Sowada 2009; 2014). This activity is particularly strong during the Early Bronze Age II (c.3000–2900 BC), and it is precisely this period during which *senet* boards are found at Arad.

Levantine games with incised squares suggest a familiarity with Egyptian game boards, which always have the playing field arrayed in squares, as opposed to depressions. At sites distant from centres of Egyptian interaction, such as Bâb edh-Dhra' (Rast and Schaub 2003, 636–7), only depressions are found, indicating no attempt at replicating an Egyptian-style *senet* board with squares. Rather, it seems that people at peripheral sites learned the game from other Levantines, using the local adaptation of *senet* arrayed with depressions. That is not to say that all players of drilled games were unfamiliar with the Egyptian versions. At least one drilled game from Arad

(Israel Museum 1989-422) has four of its 30 holes off-set from the main array, which are in the same position as marked spaces on senet boards from Egypt (Crist *et al.* 2016, 44–59, fig. 3.8).

During the Early Bronze Age III, senet disappeared from Arad, but was played at Tel es-Safi (Shai *et al.* 2014), Megiddo (Guillaume 2013, 1106) and Byblos (Dunand 1954, 310; 1958, 531, 573, 661) nearer to the coast, and again appearing as rows of squares, with Byblos also producing boards with depressions, similar to the pattern at Arad. This change in distribution reflects the changing focus of Egyptian trade relationships with the Levant, as maritime trade with Byblos became more important (Sowada 2014, 293–4, 301–2). This realignment of exchange networks also coincides with the appearance of senet in Cyprus, discussed in more detail below.

These findings provide a first step in understanding the kinds of interactions among Near Eastern peoples that led to the widespread play of games. These patterns support the concept of games as social lubricants, because the transmission of games appears to require relatively close contact between two people of different cultural backgrounds.

Evidence suggests that board games are transmitted in an additive, rather than a substitutive, manner. This is in line with the transmission of drinking practices. When new drinking practices are introduced to a culture, they do not replace indigenous practices; rather, they are added to those already extant. When wine was introduced to Gaul by Greek colonists and Etruscan traders, it complemented already existing beer-drinking practices, by filling a social niche in which it represented status through its connection to exotic lands (Dietler 2006). Wine became indigenized and incorporated into pre-existing feasting practices, without the adoption of Greek or Etruscan drinking customs (Dietler 2006, 255). This pattern can also be seen in the adoption of game boards, and is best demonstrated through the phenomenon called the ‘game context’.

A game context can be described as a physical space in which multiple games are played (Fig. 1). This can be anything from games pecked into rock near the pyramids of Meroe (de Voogt 2012), pavements and steps at the Temple of Baal at Palmyra (de Voogt 2010), and the baths, auditorium and public areas of Aphrodisias (Roueché 1993; 2007) and Ephesus (Schädler 1995; 1998) to single artefacts containing games on opposite sides, such as Egyptian boards with senet and twenty squares (e.g. Hayes 1959, 198–9). Game contexts determine spaces in which people gathered occasionally or continually through time to play games.



Figure 1

Ottoman games context on Sai Island, Sudan, with examples of seeja (five by five squares), tab (four by 12 rows of holes) and several mancala games (two rows of six or more holes). Photo by Alex de Voogt.

Artefacts displaying two different games, such as double-sided game boards, demonstrate the additive nature of game transmission as the games were played contemporaneously. When one of the games represented is not of local origin, double-sided game boards show that the same people played imported and local games. Double-sided boards have been known for approximately 4500 years and are particularly well represented in the ancient Near East, where about 70 examples can be identified from throughout the region dating from the third millennium to the ninth century BC. Forty-five have been selected to illustrate the possibility of social exchange (see Table 1).

SENET AND MEHEN IN BRONZE AGE CYPRUS

The earliest known double-sided game boards are found in Cyprus (Fig. 2) with a spiral pattern of depressions on one side and three rows of ten depressions on the opposite side (Fig. 3). This type of artefact was identified by Swiny as displaying Cypriot versions of the Egyptian games mehen and senet (Swiny 1980; 1986). No games have been discovered on Cyprus dating earlier than the introduction of mehen in the beginning of the third millennium BC (Swiny 1982). While it was once assumed that mehen and senet were simultaneous introductions to the island, evidence from the settlement site Marki *Alonia* suggests two independent introductions, with mehen toward the beginning and senet toward the end of the third millennium BC (Frankel and Webb 2006, 245–6). The longevity of mehen on the island, spanning the entire Bronze Age (2700–1050 BC), stands in stark contrast to its existence in Egypt, where the game did not survive the third millennium BC (Piccione 1990, 47; Vandier 1964, 489). This indicates that mehen was indigenized on Cyprus by the time senet was introduced (Crist).

Three double-sided gaming stones at Sotira *Kaminoudhia* (Crist ; Swiny 2003, 274), the earliest in the archaeological record, are contemporary with the oldest senet boards found on the island. Two appear in a non-domestic ritual (Swiny 2008, 48–50) or communal (Knapp 2013, 288) space, along with 13 other senet and mehen games (Swiny 2008, 49), indicating the use of this space as a place where people gathered for social activity. Another, slightly later, double-sided board in Cyprus comes from a domestic structure at Alambra *Mouttes* (Coleman *et al.* 1996, 174–6).

Evidence for interaction with the mainland appears to increase toward the end of the third millennium BC (Jacobsson 1987, 180), which led to an increasingly hybridized culture drawing from Anatolian, Levantine and perhaps Aegean and Egyptian cultures (Knapp 2008, 255–6). The adoption of senet is a prime example of the ‘acquisition of intangible types of knowledge’ (Knapp 2013, 308; Wengrow 2009, 157–8) that is increasingly recognized as an important part of exchange relations. With evidence for direct contact between Cyprus and Egypt lacking, the morphological similarity between the Cypriot and the Levantine games suggests an origin for the Cypriot games in the northern Levant. With this increasing interaction came the emergence of wealth-based status, as reflected in increasing amounts of metal displayed in mortuary ritual (Keswani 2004, 152–4; 2005, 384; Swiny 1997, 206). The changing social milieu of this time ‘required new and different levels of communication’ (Knapp 2013, 311) that may have been facilitated by the playing of senet, a form of intangible, esoteric knowledge (Helms 1988; Manning 1993, 47) adopted into communities throughout the island.

Since the point of contact between Cyprus and the mainland is thought to be the coastal settlements on the north coast, the early presence of senet at Sotira *Kaminoudhia* on the opposite end of the island seems anomalous. While senet has been identified at Bellapais *Vounous* (Swiny 1986, 35), intermediary sites in the north are pivotal to the spread of the game to the south and centre

TABLE 1
Double-sided game boards from the ancient Near East that demonstrate cultural contact

Country	Site	Context	Date (c.BC)	Surface	Reverse	References
Cyprus	Marki <i>Alonia</i>	surface	c.24–23	mehen	senet	Frankel and Webb 2006, S211
Cyprus	Sotira <i>Kaminoudhia</i>	ritual	c.24–23	mehen	senet	Crist forthcoming
Cyprus	Sotira <i>Kaminoudhia</i>	ritual	c.24–23	senet	mehen	Swiny 2003, 274
Cyprus	Sotira <i>Kaminoudhia</i>	surface	c.24–23	mehen	senet	Crist forthcoming
Cyprus	Alambra <i>Mouttes</i>	secondary	c.22–20	mehen	senet	Coleman <i>et al.</i> 1996, 174–6
Cyprus	Episkopi <i>Phaneromeni</i>	surface	c.17–15	senet	mehen	Swiny 1986, 121
Cyprus	Episkopi <i>Phaneromeni</i>	surface	c.17–15	mehen	senet	Swiny 1986, 123
Cyprus	Episkopi <i>Phaneromeni</i>	surface	c.17–15	senet	mehen	Swiny 1986, 124
Cyprus	Kouklia <i>Skales</i>	secondary	c.15–9	twenty squares	senet?	Swiny 1986, 38–9, fig. 43:c
Cyprus	Hala Sultan Tekke	secondary	c.15–13	twenty squares	12-ring	Åström 1984, 43, pl. XII; Swiny 1986, 36
Cyprus	Maa <i>Palaeokastro</i>	habitation	c.13–11	mehen	senet	Karageorghis and Demas 1988, 111, pls. LVII, CLXXXII
Egypt	Thebes	burial	c.17–16	twenty squares	senet	Mariette 1889, 16–17, pl. LI
Egypt	Thebes	burial	c.17–15	twenty squares	senet	Hayes 1959, 25, fig. 10
Egypt	unknown	unknown	c.17–12	twenty squares	senet	Prisse d'Avennes 1847, 9, pl. XLIX (4)
Egypt	unknown	unknown	c.17–12	twenty squares	senet	Hoerth 1961, 24, no. 12
Egypt	Thebes	burial	c.16–15	twenty squares	senet	Hayes 1935, 34, fig. 1
Egypt	Thebes	burial	c.16–15	twenty squares	senet	Hayes 1935, 34, fig. 1
Egypt	Thebes	burial	c.16–15	twenty squares	senet	Hayes 1935, 32–4, fig. 18
Egypt	unknown	unknown	c.16–15	twenty squares	senet	Pieper 1909, 4, fig. 5(b)
Egypt	Zawiyet el-Aryan	burial	c.16–15	twenty squares	senet	Pusch 1979, 241–4, pl. 59
Egypt	Thebes	burial	c.16–13	twenty squares	senet	Mariette 1889, 17, pl. LII (a)
Egypt	Thebes	burial	c.16–13	twenty squares	senet	Maspero 1883, 299–300, no. 4673
Egypt	Thebes	unknown	c.16–13	twenty squares	senet	Prisse d'Avennes 1846, 741
Egypt	unknown	unknown	c.16–13	twenty squares	senet	Falkener 1892, 28–32
Egypt	unknown	unknown	c.16–12	twenty squares	senet	Wiedemann 1897, 43
Egypt	unknown	unknown	c.16–12	twenty squares	senet	Refat 1972, no. 7
Egypt	Deir el-Medina	unknown	c.16–11	twenty squares	senet	Rothöhler 1996, nr H54
Egypt	Deir el-Medina	burial	c.15–14	twenty squares	senet	Schiaparelli 1927, 175–9, figs. 159–60
Egypt	unknown	unknown	c.15–14	twenty squares	senet	Hayes 1959, 198–9
Egypt	Abydos	burial	c.15	twenty squares	senet	Hayes 1959, 198, fig. 113
Egypt	Thebes	burial	c.15	twenty squares	senet	Dareddy 1902, 31–2, pl. IX
Egypt	unknown	unknown	c.15	twenty squares	senet	Devéria 1897, 86
Egypt	Thebes	burial	c.14	twenty squares	senet	Carter 1933, 130, pl. LXXV (b)
Egypt	Thebes	burial	c.14	twenty squares	senet	Carter 1933, 130–2
Egypt	Thebes	burial	c.14	twenty squares	senet	Carter 1933, 121–30, pl. XLII (a)
Egypt	Thebes	burial	c.14	twenty squares	senet	Carter 1933, 131, pl. XLII (b)
Egypt	unknown	unknown	c.13–12	twenty squares	senet	Needler 1953, 65 (no. 7), 74
Egypt	unknown	unknown	c.13–12	twenty squares	senet	Leemans 1865, pl. CCXLIV
Egypt	unknown	unknown	c.13–12	twenty squares	senet	Needler 1953, 65, 74
Egypt	Saqqara	burial	c.13	twenty squares	senet	Quibell 1909, 114, pls. LVIII–LIX
Egypt	unknown	unknown	c.13	twenty squares	senet	Pierret 1878, 81–2
Israel	Hazor	storeroom?	c.14–9	twenty squares	senet	Yadin <i>et al.</i> 1960, 6, pls. LXXXVIII, 6, CLXIV, 13
Jordan	Tell es-Sa'idiyeh	burial	c.12	twenty squares	senet	Finkel 2008, 152–3
Lebanon	Kamid el-Loz	palace?	c.14–13	twenty squares	senet	Meyer 1986, 123–6, n. 1, fig. 13
Lebanon	Kamid el-Loz	palace?	c.14–13	twenty squares	senet	Meyer 1986, 126–33, n. 21, fig. 15
Sudan	Kubban	burial	c.16–13?	twenty squares?	senet	Firth 1927, 49, 83



Figure 2

Key Bronze Age sites on Cyprus for the transmission of senet and mehen. Map by Jennifer Steffey.



Figure 3

Double-sided game from Sotira *Kaminoudhia* on Cyprus, displaying senet (left) and mehen (right) on opposite sides of the stone. Photo by Walter Crist.

of the island but cannot be investigated at this time. Considering the likelihood that senet was introduced to the island via trade with the mainland, it is also possible that it spread between communities on Cyprus in a similar fashion, through exchanges linking copper-producing communities (such as Politiko *Troullia* (Falconer and Fall 2013)) in the centre of the island to the north (Keswani 2005, 385–91; Webb *et al.* 2006), and picrolite-producing communities in the south to the central villages (Swantek 2006, 152–5; Swiny 2003, 237–8), as well as to the western coast. Once senet was introduced along such intense personal interactions it became, much like mehen, decoupled from its foreign connotations and indigenized, as shown by its ubiquity and continued play on the island through to the end of the Bronze Age, with double-sided boards continuing in use, e.g. at Episkopi *Phaneromeni* (Swiny 1986, 121–4) and Maa *Palaeokastro* (Karageorghis and Demas 1988, 111).

THE GAME OF TWENTY SQUARES AND LATE BRONZE AGE ELITE INTERACTION

One slab from Cyprus exhibits two games on the same side of the artefact (Fig. 4), which was discovered at Hala Sultan Tekke (Åström 1984, 45) and dates to the Late Bronze Age (1650–1050 BC). Found rebuilt into a wall, it is broken but displays a distinctive arrangement of squares that is characteristic of the game of ‘twenty squares’, common throughout the ancient Near East having had its ultimate origins in third millennium BC Mesopotamia (Finkel 2007; Pusch 2007). Adjacent to the twenty squares pattern is an arc of five depressions, likely to have once formed a circle of ten or 12 (Hillbom 2003, 42; 2011, 104). This pattern has been identified either as Cypriot mehen (Swiny 1986, 51) or as a Minoan game, ‘12-ring’ (Hillbom 2003, 45–6; 2011, 110). Regardless of which game the pattern represents, the appearance of twenty squares next to it suggests that it is also a game.

The distribution of twenty squares on Cyprus suggests the use of this game as a social lubricant between indigenous Cypriots and foreign traders. In all, there are four compelling examples of twenty squares from Bronze Age contexts: the famous ivory Enkomi game box (Murray *et al.* 1900, 12) and two fragmentary ivory boxes from the Ashlar Building at Enkomi (Dikaïos 1969, 255), along with the aforementioned example from Hala Sultan Tekke. The ivory boxes from Enkomi, while not unusual in the broader Near Eastern corpus of games, are unique on Cyprus because twenty squares is the only game to have been identified on the island in box form. Fragments of two ivory gaming boxes, with pieces, were found in a tomb at Hala Sultan Tekke (Niklasson 1983, 175–6), as were more ivory fragments at Morphou *Toumba tou Skourou*, including 12 square plaques, which were likely to have been inlaid playing squares (Vermeule and Wolsky 1990, 221, 240, 332). Game pieces and glass playing squares were also found at Kalavassos *Ayios Dhimitrios* (South 1996, 167). Because of the morphological consistency of these fragmentary game boards with the intact examples from Cyprus, which only display the game of twenty squares, it is probable that the same game was played on the fragmentary boards.

These games are all located in large settlements along the coast of the island where Cypriot elites interacted with foreign peoples, adopting mainland motifs in art, craft production and ideologies, which promoted social exchanges with mainlanders coming to the island for its valuable copper resources (Frankel 1993; Hadjisavvas 2002; Keswani 1989; 1993; 1996; 2005; Knapp 1998,



Figure 4

Fragmentary double-sided game from Hala Sultan Tekke on Cyprus, showing a diagnostic part of twenty squares and a half circle of 12-ring. Photo by Stuart Swiny.

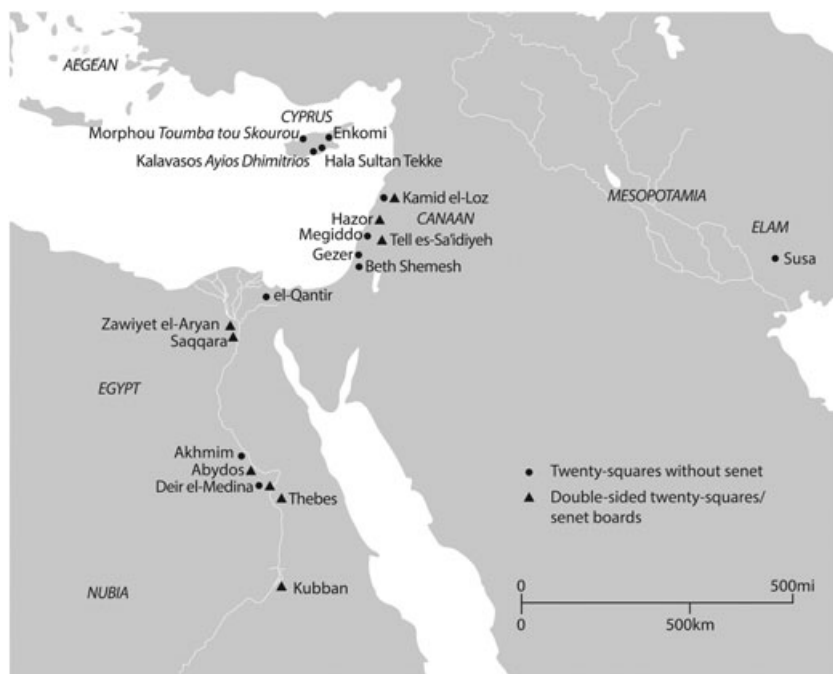


Figure 5

Distribution of senet and twenty squares in the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East during the Late Bronze Age. Map by Jennifer Steffey.

203; 2008; 2013). One of the ways in which these social interactions were promoted was through the exchange and use of artefacts decorated in the International Style, a set of artistic conventions common throughout the Near East and Aegean worlds, with shared motifs such as hunting, animal attacks and vegetation (Caubet 1998; Feldman 2002; 2006). They also provided ‘a shared code that helped to reinforce a collective identity of ruling elites’ (Feldman 2002, 24). This shared code is clearly reflected in the Amarna Letters, in which the various kings of the more powerful polities referred to one another as ‘brother’, and vassal kings referred to their overlords as ‘father’ (Moran 1992, xxii–xxxiv). Furthermore, it has been argued that these recurring styles are not solely vehicles for identification; rather, they are also reflections of common social practices shared between the various regions of the Eastern Mediterranean at this time (Caubet 1998, 110).

Outside of Cyprus, the geographical distribution of twenty squares in contexts contemporary to Late Bronze Age Cyprus shows that it was played widely throughout the Eastern Mediterranean (Fig. 5).¹ Egypt has by far produced the greatest number of archaeological examples with 38 boards, followed by Syria-Palestine with 14, Cyprus with four, and one each from Nubia and Elam. While the greatest concentration of this game is in Egypt, this period (roughly the 17th–19th Dynasties) is the only one in which the game was present there. It should be further noted

1 The famous Knossos Game Board is often cited as a possible version of twenty squares, though its form is most reminiscent of the earliest incarnation of the game, which pre-dates the Knossos board by a millennium (Hillbom, 255–6).



Figure 6

Game box of Imenmes, c.1300 BC (Musée du Louvre, E 2710). This wooden game box has two playing surfaces, the top showing twenty squares and the bottom showing senet. © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Christian Decamps / Art Resource, NY.

that this high number is at least partly due to the conditions for preservation in Egypt, and may not reflect a greater popularity there than elsewhere. Twenty squares has a longer history in Syria-Palestine, dating to the early second millennium at Mari (Parrot 1958, 13, 46–7, 182, 247, 258) and Tell Beit Mirsim (Erdös 1986, 70). During the Late Bronze Age, Syro-Palestinian boards with twenty squares are more commonly single-sided boards, with five of the 14 games from the region having another game on the reverse. This lies in stark contrast to Egypt, where 32 of 38 twenty squares boards are double-sided. While many of these games, particularly those from Egypt, were found in graves, there is no evidence that these games were solely manufactured for deposition in graves, and if they were, they were nevertheless manufactured to allow the continuation of a living practice in the afterlife, in accordance with Egyptian belief. Examples from the workers' village at Deir el-Medina demonstrate that it was played by non-elites in Egypt and did not function solely as a funerary item (Dunn-Vaturi 2012, 57).

All double-sided boards from Egypt with twenty squares are accompanied by the popular Egyptian game of senet on the other face (Fig. 6). This pairing illustrates the important role senet played in religious life, particularly concerning mortuary ritual and the passage of the soul into the underworld (Kendall 1978; Piccione 1990; 2007). The great majority of these were found in elite tombs, as is to be expected of senet, but surprising for twenty squares. Eleven of these artefacts had twenty squares on the upper face, based on the orientation of hieroglyphs or other decoration on the sides of the boards (Pusch 2007, 70–1). Twenty squares is not shown in New Kingdom tomb decoration, while senet playing is a common theme, strengthening the latter's interpretation as the paramount game of religious importance during the New Kingdom. The lack of evidence for the inclusion of twenty squares in mortuary ritual suggests that it must have played another role in Egyptian society.² Twenty squares had a role in divination in other areas of the Near East (Finkel 2007, 25–6; Meyer 1982), but no clear association of that game with augury, such as liver-shaped boards, is attested in Egypt.

Building from the interpretation of twenty squares in Cyprus as social lubricants between Cypriots and foreigners, the game may also have functioned in this manner in Egypt and Syria-Palestine. The practice of elite gift-exchange, well documented through the Amarna Letters, was a mechanism by which elites throughout the region built social ties and formed economic

2 While the religious significance of senet is often emphasized, it must have been played in other contexts also, as demonstrated by its early transmission to Cyprus as well as its presence in Syria-Palestine.

and political alliances (Moran 1992). Indeed, one of the Amarna Letters, EA 22, possibly lists two boards given by Tushratta, King of Mitanni, to Amenhotep III on the occasion of the pharaoh's marriage to a Mitannian princess (Kendall 1982, 265). The distribution of twenty squares boards is consistent with their use in this kind of interaction. Within Egypt and outside, they were located in centres where elites were concentrated, e.g. in and around Thebes and Memphis, in a palace at Kamid el-Loz, at large regional centres such as Gaza and Megiddo, and the coastal towns of Cyprus. Moreover, many of the twenty squares boards are manufactured of precious materials such as ivory, faience and wood, which would have helped to construct and maintain elite identity, signalling such identity via game boards decorated in the International Style to the foreigners with whom they were conducting the exchanges.

Game boxes from Egypt, Syria-Palestine and Cyprus show the International Style in their decoration (Fig. 7). A 17th Dynasty example from the tomb of Hornakht (Tiradritti 2010, pls. 117–18) at Dra Abu el-Naga, located on the West Bank at Thebes, shows a gazelle eating from what appears to be a volute palmette on one of the ivory side panels, as well as a sphinx typical of the International Style (Mariette 1889, 16–17). The game box from a 17th (or early 18th) Dynasty tomb at el-Asasif, another Theban necropolis, has two ivory panels on either side of the central row of twenty squares with incised decoration: one with a dog and a lion facing each other, and the other with a dog attacking two gazelles (Maspero 1883, 299). This box is stylistically similar to the game box from Kamid el-Loz, though on the corresponding panels dogs or jackals are depicted, and on the side panels scenes with gazelles or antelopes are shown.³ Game box 657b, from an elite structure at Enkomi, is made from ivory and displays characteristic decorations of lions attacking gazelles (Dikaios 1969, 255), and is nearly identical to the examples from el-Asasif and Kamid el-Loz. The famous intact Enkomi game box has a number of motifs attributable to the International Style, with apparent bull hunting scenes on the long sides of the box, and bulls among vegetation on the short sides of the box (Kiely 2014).

The commonalities shared among the twenty squares game boards of the Eastern Mediterranean during the second half of the second millennium BC suggest that this game served as a sort of ludic *lingua franca* for the elites of the region. During this period in which exchange between Egypt, Syria-Palestine and Cyprus was extensive, common artistic styles, formalized exchanges, and drinking and feasting occasions (Steel 2013, 91) were all ways in which elites in these regions participated in this shared cultural milieu. To this may be added the playing of twenty squares, which appears in the same elite contexts and shares the same geographical and chronological boundaries as these other practices that all served as social lubricants bridging cultural boundaries.

Further supporting the evidence that twenty squares was used for this type of social interaction is its disappearance in Egypt and Cyprus⁴ after the Bronze Age collapse, which ended the system of elite gift-exchange. Instead, the game only remained in favour during the first millennium BC in Syria-Palestine and Mesopotamia, the region from which it originated. This shows that twenty squares was not indigenized outside of these regions, and presents a contrast to the indigenization of *senet* and *mehen* in Cyprus during the third millennium BC. It appears that, during the Late Bronze Age, twenty squares 'tied the webs of interaction with dependence' (Hodder

3 Another decorated ivory game-box has been compared to Kamid el-Loz (Finkel, 152–3). It was discovered in a twelfth century BC burial at Tell es-Sa'idiyeh (Jordan).

4 There is one example from the fill of the *dromos* of a Cypro-Geometric tomb at Kouklia *Skales* in Cyprus (Karageorghis, 122), but the artefact itself cannot be dated to this period as this deposit may consist of Bronze Age material.

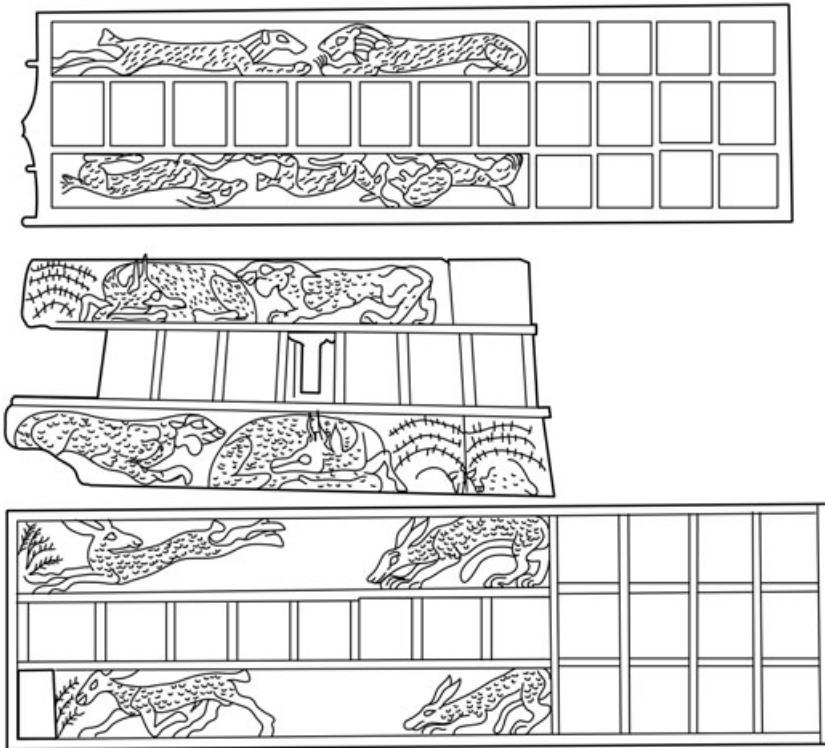


Figure 7

Twenty squares game boards featuring the International Style in their decoration. Provenance from the top: el-Asasif, Egypt; Enkomi, Cyprus; Kamid el-Loz, Lebanon. Drawing by Jennifer Steffey.

2012, 111) on the practices, artefacts and interactions that were an essential part of elite identity. Once the disruptions at the end of the period broke down these social systems, these entanglements were broken in those regions to which the game was introduced. In its native regions, other material and social entanglements, which were not related to the Late Bronze Age system of exchange, persisted and the game continued to be played. The transmission of *senet* and *mehen* to Cyprus probably represented smaller scale interactions with mainland peoples, leading to indigenization on the island due to their detachment from their cultural contexts in Egypt without sustained contact with such contexts.

FACILITATING INTERACTION

By looking at the specific historical and archaeological contexts of *senet*, *mehen* and twenty squares, the conclusions made by de Voogt *et al.* (2013) are now elaborated. The assertion that the transmission of games is not contingent on conquest can be affirmed, based on the lack of evidence for a conquest of Cyprus at any point during the Bronze Age. *Senet*, *mehen* and twenty squares all had to reach the island through other mechanisms, exchange being the most probable considering the interactions that are evident during the relevant time periods. Furthermore, the

introduction of twenty squares to Egypt does not appear to have been through conquest either, since the earliest examples appear in tombs of the 17th Dynasty in Upper Egypt (Hayes 1959, 25; Maspero 1883, 114–15; Pusch 1979, 202–3), unoccupied by the Hyksos ruling Lower Egypt. This brings into question a long-standing assertion that the Hyksos introduced the game to Egypt (Pieper 1909, 19; Pusch 2007, 70), as no examples of the game of twenty squares have been found in the Nile Delta. All three of these games witnessed innovations in their layout and decoration when adopted into new cultures, and these innovations were maintained as they spread throughout the receiving societies.

Intense personal interactions are those that caused *senet*, *mehen* and twenty squares to spread throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. In Cyprus, the introduction of games was brought about through interactions with the mainland focusing on exchange, and they then spread rapidly throughout the interior of the island via well-attested intercommunity relations. *Senet* was similarly introduced to the Levant during the third millennium BC, though it does not appear to have been adopted into society in quite the same way that it was in Cyprus. Rather, the game only appears during time periods when there is considerable Egyptian presence, and when this presence shifted so did the geographical range of the game. Twenty squares increased in popularity throughout the region during the Late Bronze Age as a way for elites to participate in a shared cultural milieu, allowing them not only to affirm their common identity with foreigners, but also to signal their own esoteric knowledge and status to people of lower socio-economic status locally. All of these situations demonstrate the liminality of games, which allowed individuals from distant regions and cultural backgrounds to interact across real and imagined boundaries.

While these intense personal interactions are integral to the spread of games, they also prove to be crucial to the continued play of the games outside their home region. It may even be the case that the more intense the interaction, the more contingent the game becomes on that interaction to maintain its presence. The unravelling of the system of elite exchanges at the end of the Late Bronze Age, and the realignment of exchange routes during the third millennium BC, were the end of socio-economic systems requiring cross-cultural interaction, which, once they ceased to exist, saw the abandonment of once-popular games that were introduced as a result of those social realities. Moderate interaction such as that seen between Cyprus and the mainland during the third millennium BC, in which *senet* and *mehen* were less entangled with ideas of identity and status, may have allowed a process of indigenization.

Games in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean reveal a largely untouched corpus of material that informs us about their social functions as a social lubricant. Previous research focusing on the rules and origins of games and the increasing number of games found in archaeological and historical contexts worldwide continue to illustrate a ubiquitous practice that is shown to affect human interaction throughout history.

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