

ROMAN BOARD GAME PIECES IN NORTHERN DOBRUDJA*

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Abstract: The authors present a series of dice and counters from the early and late Roman period discovered in ancient sites in northern Dobrudja. By analyzing the game pieces found in Dobrudja, we can notice the great similarities with other geographical areas, as well as the conservatism of the pieces used for games in antiquity, originated in their ancestral tradition.

Key words: Roman Period, Lower Moesia, northern Dobrudja, ancient games, board game counters and dice

Cuvinte cheie: epoca romană, Moesia Inferior, nordul Dobrogei, jocuri antice, jetoane și zaruri

Greek & Roman Board Games. A Historical Survey

In our attempt to understand the various types of ancient games played in Antiquity, we have to take into account Flinders Petrie's general typology that we can very well apply to nowadays' games. Thus, we can distinguish three main classes of games: a) games of chance – like card games, dominoes or backgammon; b) games of skill – like billiards, tennis, football and c) games based on skill of intellect – like chess and draughts¹.

Somewhere in between the last two categories we can also place the “board games”, whose main principles remain either capturing your opponent's pieces (*Ludus latrunculorum*), or moving them in order to gain a prescribed position on the table game (*Ludus Duodecim Scripta*). These games enjoyed great popularity and, from a quantitative perspective, played an important role in the everyday life of the ancients, as they were pastimes and were also used for different bets². The origin of these games is extremely remote, being impossible to indicate who invented them or when. Herodotus gave the credit for the invention of the first board games to the Lydians, narrating a legend according to which, in the times of king Atys, a great famine ravaged *Lydia*; one of the conjectural remedies in order not to seek food was playing board games: for one entire day they would play and for the next day they would stop playing and start eating. In this way, the Greek historian informs us, they were able to survive for eighteen years³. Although Herodotus's assertions can't be completely reliable⁴, we can still

* The authors wish to thank Dr. V. H. Baumann for the idea of this paper. In Tulcea Museum's collection there are many pieces considered as gaming counters; in fact they are spindle-whorls. The number of gaming counters from *Isaccea-Noviodunum* lent by Dr. Baumann to the authors is great, but most of them were excluded for three reasons: some of them may be considered as spindle-whorls belonging to different historical periods, some belong to the discoverers and are to be published in time, while others were discovered in medieval layers and regarded as „medieval”, although they present analogies with counters from earlier periods.

¹ Flinders Petrie 1927, 51.

² Paki, Cociș 1992, 149.

³ Kurke 1999, 248-249.

⁴ These board games were attested long before in Mesopotamia and Egypt, where they were extremely varied and spread. Flinders Petrie mentions some of the most important games practiced in Egypt,

notice the importance of these games for the Greek citizen. The Ancient Greek board games, broadly called *pestoi*, after the name of the game pieces, represented true contests of skills and strategy, while also bearing a symbolical meaning. Thus, the *pestoi* game embodied the order and the clear structure of the polis, revealing to the player “what it meant to submit himself to the rules and the symbolic order of the city which granted him equal rights with all the other citizens”⁵.

The Roman world took over and augmented the practice of these games, even if from the elite’s point of view the optics had somehow changed. Writers like Cicero, Juvenal and Martial, were extremely critical towards these habits, regarding them as a sign of moral decay, against the normal intellectual evolution of the individual⁶. However, these games of chance were extremely popular even among the elite, enjoying great popularity and being practiced even by emperors like Caligula, Nero or Claudius who is credited to have written a treaty on dice-games⁷.

The board pieces had various names – *calces*, *calculi*, *gemmae*, *latrunculi*, *lapilli* and even *milites* or *hostes*, according to the “military” character of the game as in *Ludus Latrunculorum*⁸. They were the shape of a plate with irregular diameter and were made mainly of bone, glass and occasionally, of ceramic fragments.

The distinction between pieces was most often made based on the colour, although some theories claim they were distinguished by shape⁹. The bone pieces were separated through various incisions engraved on the upper side which also had a decorative role¹⁰. Some bone pieces were bored through the middle in order to be easily kept strung¹¹. Some of these pieces were engraved either with letters or with numbers, but until now no obvious explanation was given regarding their significance¹².

Another extremely important element was the die (*tessera*), made by bone and marked so as the sum of values from the opposite and parallel sides to always be seven¹³. Also, must be taken into account the stone or brick boards (*tabulae lusoriae*), having different shapes and dimensions according to the nature of the game. A fragmentary brick piece from *Noviodunum* (ICEM, inv. 48838) seems to have been used for the mill game, which was very popular even in Antiquity¹⁴. Among the various types of games played in the Roman society we can enumerate: *Ludus latrunculorum*, *Ludus Duodecim Scripta* (with its related variants *alea* and *tabula*), the mill or *Felix Sex*. Amongst them, the most widespread was *Ludus latrunculorum*;

also attested by the archaeological researches among which the *sent*, also known as “The game of the 30 squares”, see – Flinders Petrie 1927, 52-56; also Bell 1979, 26.

⁵ Kurke 1999, 260.

⁶ Ciugudean 1997, 40.

⁷ Bell 1979, 33.

⁸ Ciugudean 1997, 40.

⁹ A. Tilley considered that the pieces of the two opponents were distinguished by their shape, while the colour differed only in terms of value, see Tilley 1892, 335.

¹⁰ Paki, Cociș 1992, 151.

¹¹ Alicu, Nemeș 1982, 349.

¹² Ciugudean 1997, 41.

¹³ Alicu *et alii* 1994, 65.

¹⁴ Austin 1934, 26 for Roman boards in Britain. Our piece is similar in the way in which the squares are disposed with two other pieces discovered in the province of Dacia, at *Potaissa* and *Drobeta*, see Paki, Cociș 1992, 156, pl. 4/1-2.

mentioned for the first time by Varro, this board game seems to have had much more ancient roots¹⁵, probably deriving from the Greek game of *pešsoi*. This strategy game, enjoyed by the soldiers in the legionary camps¹⁶ and not only, was played on an 8×8 board, but the number of squares could vary from case to case¹⁷. The accurate number of pieces used at the beginning of the match by each player is still unknown. However, we know that there were at least two kinds of pieces, distinguished by colour: soldiers, who could advance only forward and backward one square at a time, and officers, who could advance more squares in any direction¹⁸. The purpose of this game was to close the opponent's pieces between two of one's own. The captured piece was then removed from the board, the winner having thus the right to make a supplementary move. The player who managed first to capture the majority of enemy pieces, was proclaimed winner and received the glorious title of *imperator* – a proof pleading for the game's military character¹⁹.

Another popular game in the Roman period was *Ludus Duodecim Scripta*, a forerunner of modern backgammon. The board used for this game followed mainly the same pattern, being divided in three rows of twelve letters arranged in two columns which could often form a funny sentence²⁰. The pieces (each player had 15 at the beginning of the game) were inserted through the middle row and were moved according to the dice casting. The first player who managed to remove all his pieces from the board was considered winner of the game²¹. From *Ludus Duodecim Scripta*, it was developed the game of *Tabula*, whose basic rules were detailed by Isidor from Seville²². The game survived throughout the Byzantine period, being later borrowed by the Arabs and converted into the game of Nard²³, which, in its turn was the forefather of the modern backgammon. The archaeological evidence and the literary information recompose the image of this game spread across all strata of Roman society. R. Pack underlined an obscure passage from Petronius's *Trimalchio* which mentioned that white and black counters were used for this game²⁴.

The Mill Game preserved its character and rules almost unchanged until today. Each player had at his disposal nine pieces, with which he tried to form a line of three, either vertically, horizontally or diagonally. The one who managed the first to form this line, removed from the board one enemy piece, being declared winner if he left his opponent with only two pieces on the board.

The *astragali* game is also extremely old, as pieces of this sort being are documented from the Bronze Age contexts to the present day, in different geographical areas²⁵. Some astragals were thrown and the numerical value was given by the side which could be seen²⁶.

¹⁵ Austin 1934, 26.

¹⁶ B. Rütli mentioned the discovery of not less than 570 game objects made of white and black glass in the *Vindobona castrum*, see Rütli 1988, 100.

¹⁷ Austin 1934, 26-27, fig. 2.

¹⁸ Tilley 1892, 335.

¹⁹ Austin 1934, 26.

²⁰ Bell 1979, 31.

²¹ For a detailed explanation of this game's rules, see Austin 1934, 33-34.

²² Austin 1935, 76.

²³ Austin 1935, 78.

²⁴ Pack 1975, 214-215.

²⁵ Bass 1986, 292.

²⁶ Ayalon 2005, 71.

Archaeological Survey of Roman Board Games

Undoubtedly, pieces belonging to different types of games from the Greek and Roman periods are archaeological materials encountered often during excavations. Until now there have also been published a large number of these artefacts, coming from various archaeological contexts. The publication of these items ranged from simple observations to the careful presentation of the objects and the way in which they could be used. If regarding the last statement we can mention the studies of W. M. Flinders Petrie about the games in ancient Egypt²⁷, other comprehensive analysis, articles and monographs on ancient game pieces were brief and are too numerous to be dealt with here.

Sets consisting of Roman game pieces represent the best evidence of how the games were taking place and the number of pieces involved. G. Clarke, by analyzing a set of 15 black counters, 11 white counters, 1 ivory dice, a semicircular piece and a “stick” of coral from Lankhills cemetery, presents this type of discoveries in *Britannia*²⁸. In addition to white and black, glass counters can have various other colours, but particularly interesting is the combination of these counters with a number of other bone-objects, *astragali*, dice and “sticks”, equivalent to dice. Discovering them together represents a proof of the variety of games rather than the prevailing use in the same game of all these objects. Among the game pieces, the most enigmatic remain those “sticks” of coral or ivory whose role is assumed to be equivalent with dice, their period of use being also extremely broad, from pre-Roman contexts²⁹ throughout the Roman period – Lankhills and the Herault Valley³⁰ until the Middle Ages³¹.

Chronologically, the game pieces were discovered in various archaeological contexts belonging to the ancient Greco-Roman world, Near East and Egypt or Medieval Europe³².

In the Greek period, numerous discoveries of game-pieces, especially in funerary contexts, denote the large spreading of those games – *petteia* or *pesseia* – in which coloured glass-counters were used – *pettoi* or *psephoi*. Such counters were found in large numbers in the necropolis of Magna Grecia together with *astragali* and dice in “Roman system”. Thus, in one single grave from *Herakleia* (3rd – 2nd centuries B.C.), 105 glass-counters of different colours³³ were found. The rules of the game can be easily presumed, as the board was probably similar to those discovered at *Perachora*³⁴, in an earlier context but on which undoubtedly the same type of pieces was used, similar to those discovered in the tombs of other Greek cities, such as *Delos*, *Samothrace*, *Thassos* or *Apollonia Pontica*³⁵.

²⁷ Flinders Petrie 1927, 51-57.

²⁸ Clarke 1979, 251-254.

²⁹ Flinders Petrie 1927, 57, nos. 230-232, pl. 49/230-232.

³⁰ Clarke 1979, 252; Feugère, Prévot 2008, 261, fig. 16/46.

³¹ Ayalon 2005, 72.

³² In Near East, the Arab conquest also brought the prohibition of gambling games by the Qur'an, along with the prohibition of pork and alcohol drinking. But the ban did not have a great effect as the discovery of some game objects in the Arab and Crusader era living levels show at *Caesarea Maritima*, see Ayalon 2005, 72.

³³ Russo 2002, 66-67.

³⁴ Dunbabin 1962, 131-132, pl. 132.

³⁵ Deonna 1938, 240, fig. 263-264; Dusenbery 1998, 1135-1137; Ghali-Kahil 1954, 242, fig. 28; Panayotova 2008, 112-113, fig. 9-10, for *astragali*.

In the Roman period we can record an “explosion” of proofs regarding the practicing of the games in all social strata. Sometimes harshly condemned by ancient authors as a crime against morality, a fact which would foreshadow the later religious prohibitions as in the case of Qur'an, the games from the Roman period had a variety of forms and manifestations. Certainly, many types of games develop from older ones, and in most cases the differences are extremely small. *Astragali* continued to be widely used, as it was discovered in contexts of the early and late Roman period. Thus the frequency of using counter-games remains somehow unchanged in the Roman world. Naturally, game pieces are frequently encountered in military areas, such as *Vindobona*³⁶, but this does not mean an exclusion of their practice in civil areas, urban or rural. We would rather link the broad universe of games in this period with childhood and all the social strata, as the game pieces are also well documented in funerary contexts, regardless of the sex or age of the deceased.

The necropolis and settlements from the Lower Danube are no exception: dice and counters were found at *Noviodunum*³⁷, *Beroe*³⁸, *Callatis*³⁹, *Oescus*⁴⁰, *Novae*, *Nicopolis ad Istrum*, *Augusta Traiana*⁴¹ in contexts ranging from the 1st to the 7th century A.D. The bone-processing workshops testify the production of these gaming pieces, among other necessary items of daily use⁴². Differences between the final products of different workshops are small, the majority of them having similar decoration despite slight variations found even in the case of the products manufactured in the same region. A comparative study regarding – among other objects – the Roman gaming pieces, made on samples found at *Virunum*, *Augusta Raurica* and *Magdalensberg* showed small differences in ornamentation and form between the examined samples⁴³. However, we can state that the game pieces discovered in *Noricum* are similar to those coming from *Carnuntum*⁴⁴, *Viminacium*⁴⁵, *Salona*⁴⁶, *Naissus*, *Singidunum*, *Pontes* or *Gorsium*⁴⁷ and their conservatism in shape is undoubtedly due to the long tradition.

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³⁶ Rütli 1988, 100.

³⁷ Simion 1994-1995, 147, fig. 13/i.

³⁸ Petre 1987, 69-70, pl. 126/200j.

³⁹ Preda 1980, pl. 78; Topoleanu 1984, 195. no. 51, pl. 5/11, pl. 10/2.

⁴⁰ Kabakčieva 1996, 106, no. 11, pl. 7/8; Kabakčieva 2000, 47, nos. 21-24, fig. 39, pl. 6/21-24.

⁴¹ Vladkova 2006, 280, pl. 13/1-11.

⁴² Labaune 2008, 56, fig. 2/32-42; Bertrand 2008, 125, fig. 33/1-8.

⁴³ Deschler-Erb, Gostenčnik 2008, 293.

⁴⁴ Buora, Jobst 2002, 216, fig. 2-8.

⁴⁵ Spasić-Đurić 2002, 99, fig. 80.

⁴⁶ Clairmont, Handler Auth, von Gozenbach 1975, 228, pl. 60.

⁴⁷ Petković 1995, 53-54, pl. 40/1-13.

The Roman board games pieces preserved in the collections of Tulcea Museum were found in contexts dated to the 2nd – 7th centuries. The early finds (dice) were reported in the necropolis of *Noviodunum* while the late ones were discovered in the necropolis of *Beroe* – Piatra Frecăței. In Lower Moesia, the earliest finds of the Roman period seem to be several counters discovered at *Oescus*, dated to the 1st century A.D. The custom of using these objects continued throughout the Roman and late Roman period, preserving their form. Therefore, a strict chronological division between the findings and the analysis of their morphological evolution is hard to achieve. Although, at first sight, they appear as minor objects possessing a small documentary value, however the Roman board games pieces are an important documentary source on daily life and funerary practices during the Roman times.

The Catalogue of Finds

I. Dice

1. Ceramic die, ICEM, inv. 40322 (Pl. 1/1).

1.3 × 1.1 cm.

Homogenous brown clay, with shells and limestone particles in fabrics.

Context: (*L*)*Ibida*, *passim* (donation Nechifor).

Bibliography: Opaît 1991, 51, no. 84, fig. 22/84.

2. Bone die, ICEM, inv. 43513 (Pl.1/2).

Square of 1 cm side-length.

Beautifully processed brown bone; the ornament is based on two engraved dots, composed of two concentric circles with a dot in the middle.

Context: *Noviodunum* 1990, *passim*?

3. Bone die, ICEM, inv. 43513 bis (pl. 1/3).

Square of 1 cm side-length.

The same features shared by the above mentioned die, to which it actually matches.

Context: *Noviodunum* 1990, *passim*?

4. Bone die, ICEM, inv. 27983 (Pl. 1/4).

1.2 × 1.1 cm.

Well executed grey shaded bone with dots made of two concentric circles.

Context: *Noviodunum* 1976, *passim*.

5. Ceramic die, ICEM, inv. 3380 (Pl. 1/5).

1.8 × 1.6 cm.

Dark-red clay with limestone particles in its composition, roughly worked out.

Context: *Troesmis* 1977, C30, -0.97.

II. Counters

1. Bone counter, ICEM, inv. 41232 (Pl. 2/1).
Sizes: Dm = 2.1 cm; Gr = 0.6 cm.
Polished truncated cone-shaped bone with a central dot.
Context: *Dinogetia* 1984, S A, □3, B187.
2. Glass counter, ICEM, inv. 1307 (Pl. 2/2).
Sizes: oval, 1.7 × 2 cm, Gr. = 0.7 cm.
Oval green glass counter with a shiny black outer layer.
Context: *Dinogetia*, *passim*?
3. Glass counter, ICEM, inv. 41142 (Pl. 2/3).
Dm. = 1.8 cm; Gr = 0.7 cm.
Round, slightly truncated cone-shaped counter, made of golden glass covered by a shiny black layer.
Context: Telița–Amza 1987, SIII, □22, -0.45.
4. Glass counter, ICEM, inv. 41232 (Pl. 2/4).
Dm. = 2 ; Gr. = 0.7 cm.
Oval counter made of light colored glass covered by a bluish-black layer.
Context: *Dinogetia*, *passim*?
5. Bone counter, ICEM, inv. 48484 (Pl. 2/5).
Dm. = 2.2 cm; Gr. 0.7 cm.
Unornamented polished truncated cone-shaped bone.
Context: *Argamum* 2007, *extra muros*.
6. Bone counter. ICEM, no. (Pl. 2/6).
Dm. = 1.7 cm; Gr. = 0.3 cm.
Polished truncated cone-shaped bone; there is a circular incision in the center, representing the starting point of 5 rays.
Context: *Noviodunum* area, private collection.
7. Brick having represented a mill game – *tabula lusoria*, ICEM, inv. 48838 (Pl. 1/6).
12.5 × 11.5 cm; Gr. = 4.5 cm.
Fragmentary brick made of dark-red paste; incised lines representing a mill game were discovered on one of the brick's sides.
Context: *Noviodunum* 2006, the civil settlement, *passim*.

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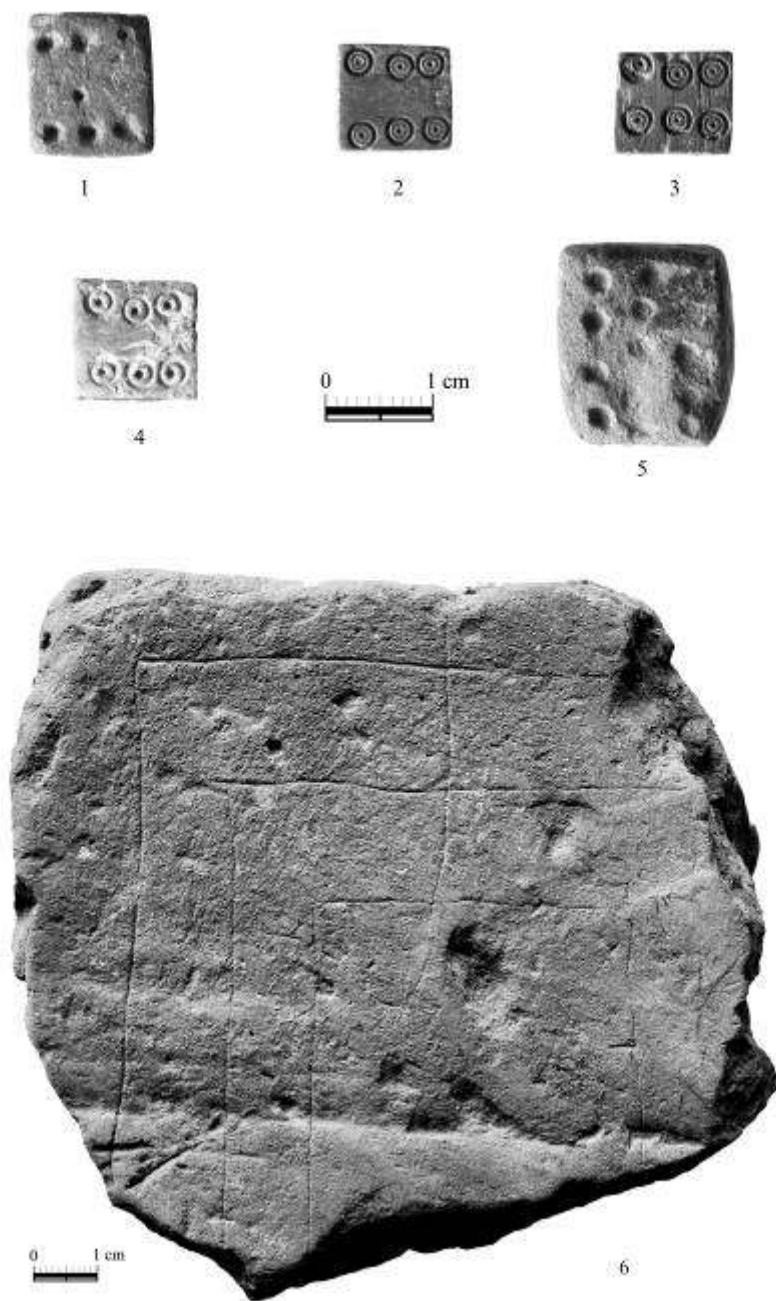
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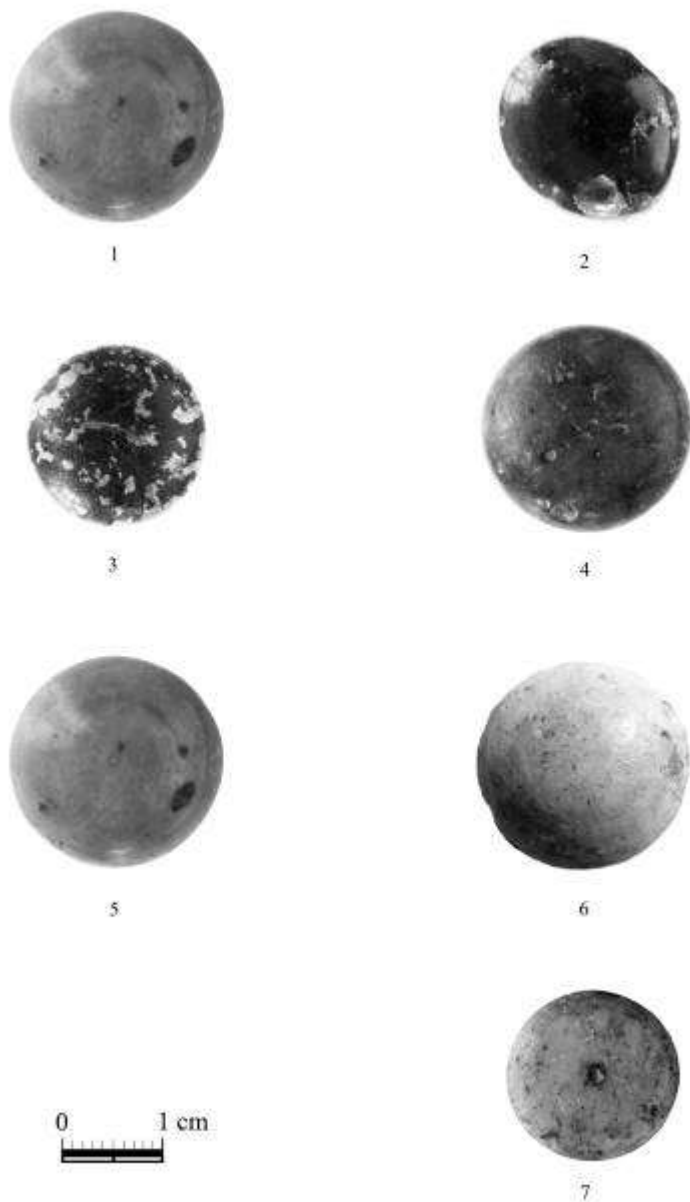
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Pl. 1.



Pl. 2.