

ANCIENT GREEK BOARD GAMES AND HOW TO PLAY THEM

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THE PAULY-WISSOWA ARTICLE on ancient board games (“*lusoria tabula*”) is over a thousand columns long. It meticulously catalogues the literary and archaeological evidence, details the shapes of boards and pieces, and reconstructs the forms of play.¹ As such, it is a monument to nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft*—different in scale but not in kind from most of the scholarly research done on ancient board games. My title (which is tongue-in-cheek) gestures towards precisely this kind of antiquarian endeavor—the reconstruction of ancient *Realia* for their own sake. After all, what could be more trivial than games, both for the ancients and for the scholarly reconstruction?

This essay will not really be “Greek Board Games and How to Play Them”; instead, I want to consider the conceptual world within which board games might have been important for the Greeks. To situate this topic a little: It is well known that the Greeks developed a powerful egalitarian ideology centuries before they began to engage in explicit political theorizing or political philosophy.² And ancient historians spend a lot of time engaged in a chicken-and-egg debate about whether constitutional reforms generated democracy or, conversely, democratic ideology enabled the emergence of democratic institutional structures.³ For those who believe (as I do) that *mentalité* had to precede constitutional structure, the question becomes, where did egalitarian ideology come from? How did it establish and reproduce itself? How ultimately did the city interpellate citizens?⁴ I want to examine how various

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1. Lamer 1927, cols. 1900–2029.

2. For the relatively late appearance of explicit political theory in Greece and the lack of any explicit democratic theory in Athens, see Jones 1957, 41–72; Loraux 1986, 173–80, 202–20; Ober 1989, 38; Ober 1998.

3. On this debate, cf. Ober 1989, 22–23; Connor 1996.

4. This question is meant to invoke the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's notion that individuals are “hailed into” (or as he puts it, “interpellated by”) ideology so that they can be “good subjects”

material practices—like coinage, prostitution, and games—functioned literally and discursively to create and reproduce ideology in what we might call an “incorporated” state long before it was ever formulated explicitly in theoretical terms. My interest is specifically focused on the archaic period, in which I believe a whole set of material practices figured as symbolic operators within a significant contest of paradigms and ideologies.

Games may seem an absurdly trivial domain for scholarly investigation, but I would contend that it is precisely their lowly, unexamined status that endows games with extraordinary power to inculcate values within culture. Thus P. Bourdieu has taught us to see the informing power of quotidian bodily practices to shape the *habitus*, the enduring disposition, of social actors in conformity with their social status, roles, and expectations.⁵ As Bourdieu puts it, we must attend to all that “goes without saying because it comes without saying,” to all that is on the near side of language, the “diffuse education which moves directly from practice to practice without passing through discourse.”⁶ Games would seem to be a paradigmatic case for such sociological analysis, since continuously and from an early age, children participate in these symbolic, rule-bound structures that teach them how to behave in “real life.”

On the other hand, I must acknowledge a limitation on the investigation. With games, though my concern is with practice, it is practice already at one remove, refracted and mediated through literary and visual representations. We do not have the luxury of anthropologists, to observe games as they are played “in the field,” but only in the scanty and haphazard references that survive in the remains of Greek cultural production. Thus, though it is my contention that games do their cultural work as practice, prior to verbalization and theory, we can catch them only on the other side of that divide, fixed in texts and images like insects in amber.

Let me begin with a strange passage from Herodotus, from his ethnographic description of the Ionians’ eastern neighbors, the Lydians (1.94.1–7):

And the Lydians use customs very similar to the Greeks, apart from the fact that they prostitute their female children. And first of men whom we know they minted and used gold and silver coinage, and they were also the first retail traders (κάπηλοι). And the Lydians themselves say that also the games which are now established for themselves and the Greeks were their invention. And they say that at the same time as these were invented among them, they also settled Tyrsenia, speaking thus concerning these things: in the kingship of Atys the son of Manes, an intense famine occurred throughout all Lydia. And [they say that] for a time the Lydians persevered living [with it], but that afterwards, when it didn’t stop, they sought remedies, different people contriving different strategies against it. [They say that] there were invented then the forms of dice and knucklebones and of ball and of all the other games except *pessoi* [conventionally translated “draughts”]; for the invention of these the Lydians do not claim as their own (ἔξευρεθῆναι δὴ ὦν τότε καὶ τῶν κύβων καὶ τῶν ἀστραγάλων καὶ τῆς σφαίρης καὶ τῶν

within particular ideological formations. For definition and full discussion of “interpellation,” see Althusser 1971; for significant theoretical modifications of Althusser, see Smith 1988; Silverman 1992, 15–51.

5. See Bourdieu 1977, 72–158; 1984, 466–84; 1990, 52–111.

6. Quotations taken from Bourdieu 1977, 167; 1990, 103.

ἀλλέων πασέων παιγνιέων τὰ εἶδεα, πλὴν πεσσῶν· τούτων γὰρ ὧν τὴν ἐξεύρεσιν οὐκ οἰκητοῦνται Λυδοί). But they did this with respect to the famine when they had invented them: one day, they played the entire day, in order not to seek food, and the other day they stopped playing and ate. In such a way they lived for eighteen years. But when the evil did not abate, but raged still more violently, their king, thus having divided two shares of all the Lydians, allotted one group for staying and another for emigration from the land, and over the one group allotted to stay there the king himself was in command, and over the one departing his own child, whose name was Tyrsenos. And those who had been allotted to go out from the land went down to Smyrna and contrived a sailing, putting into the ships all, however much moveable property was useful to them, and sailed away in search of livelihood and land, until, having passed many nations, they came to the Ombrioi, where they established cities and where they live up to this time. And instead of Lydians, they changed their name after the son of the king who led them; making themselves eponymous after this one, they were called Tyrsenians.

Already in antiquity, Herodotus was criticized for this claim (about the Lydians inventing games): thus Athenaeus observes that Homer had already represented ballgames and knucklebones as elements of the heroic age, long predating the reign of the Lydian King Atys.⁷ Given that Herodotus' report of this invention has no apparent basis in fact, it provokes the questions: What motivates Herodotus' claim? In what way do games form a natural class with prostitution, coined money, and retail trade? Why attribute the invention of games to the Lydians? And why the peculiar insistence that the Lydians invented all the games except *pestoi*?

One way of approaching these questions is to set Herodotus' list in the context of other such inventories, which seem to have enjoyed a peculiar popularity in the fifth and fourth centuries. Though no other source corroborates Herodotus' attribution of all these inventions to the Lydians, several fifth- and fourth-century writers offer analogous lists of εὐρήματα, crediting them variously to Palamedes, Prometheus, or other, foreign, culture heroes.⁸ Thus Gorgias, in his set speech in defense of Palamedes (falsely accused of treason against the Greek host at Troy by Odysseus), has his beleaguered hero claim to be a "great benefactor of the Greeks and all mankind" because of his many inventions (Gorgias frag. B 11a.30 DK):

τίς γὰρ ἂν ἐποίησε τὸν ἀνθρώπειον βίον πόριμον ἐξ ἀπόρου καὶ κεκοσμημένον ἐξ ἀκόσμου, τάξεις τε πολεμικάς εὐρῶν μέγιστον εἰς πλεονεκτήματα, νόμους τε γραπτούς φύλακας [τε] τοῦ δικαίου, γράμματα τε μνήμης ὄργανον, μέτρα τε καὶ σταθμὰ συναλλαγῶν εὐπόρους διαλλαγάς, ἀριθμὸν τε χρημάτων φύλακα, πυρσοὺς τε κρατίστους καὶ ταχίστους ἀγγέλους, πεσσούς τε σχολῆς ἄλυπον διατριβήν;

For who [else] could have made human life resourceful from resourceless and ornamented from unadorned, by inventing military tactics as the greatest [defense] against

7. Ath. *Deipnosophistae* 1.19A: "Herodotus is wrong in saying that games were invented in the reign of Atys when there was a famine; for the heroic age antedated his time." (Ἡρόδοτος δὲ οὐ καλῶς εἰρηκεν ἐπὶ Ἄττος διὰ λιμὸν εὐρεθῆναι τὰς παιδίας· πρεσβεύει γὰρ τοῖς χρόνοις τὰ ἡρωικά.)

8. On the motif of the πρώτος εὐρετής, see Kleingünther 1933; Kleingünther regards the topos as post-Homeric, a development of sixth- and fifth-century rationalism and historical research. Xenophanes somewhere attributed the invention of coinage to the Lydians (frag. 4 W = Pollux 9.83), but we have no way of knowing if this was part of a list of inventions like that of Herodotus. Prometheus, of course, also figures in such lists (e.g., Aeschylus, *PV* 446–506), but he is nowhere credited with the invention of games.

acts of overreaching, and written laws as guardians of justice, and writing as an instrument of memory, and weights and measures as reconciliations of commercial exchanges, and number as the guardian of property, and fire signals as the strongest and swiftest messengers, and *pestoi* as a painless pastime for leisure?

Indeed, the false accusation, trial, and condemnation of Palamedes represented a favorite topic of Attic tragedy: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides (along with Astydamos the Younger) are each known to have composed a *Palamedes*, while we know of four separate tragedies that staged the revenge of Palamedes' father Nauplius.⁹ A staple of these plays appears to have been Palamedes' (or Nauplius') cataloguing of his (or his son's) beneficial inventions (probably, as in Gorgias, as part of his self-defense). Thus a fragment of Aeschylus' *Palamedes* credits the title character with the invention of military tactics and three meals a day (frag. 182 R), while a fragment from Sophocles' *Nauplius* attributes to Palamedes the invention of the Greek defense wall, of number, weights and measures, military tactics, and the "measure and courses of the stars" (Soph. frag. 432 R). Most similar to Herodotus' account of the Lydian invention of games as a distraction from famine is another Sophoclean list of Palamedes' benefactions (Soph. frag. 479 R):¹⁰

οὐ λιμὸν οὗτος τῶνδ' ἔπαυσε, σὺν θεῷ
εἰπεῖν, χρόνον τε διατριβάς σοφωτάτας
ἐφηῦρε φλοίσβου μετὰ κόπον καθημένοις,
πεσσοὺς κύβους τε, τερπνὸν ἀργίας ἄκος;

Did this one not stop the famine from those [men], so to speak with god's grace, and did he [not] invent the cleverest pastimes for those sitting at ease after the stroke of battle—*pestoi* and *kuboi* as a pleasant cure of idleness?

By the fourth century, the anonymous author of Alcidas' *Odyseus* had expanded this list to include μουσική and νόμισμα along with military tactics, writing, number, weights and measures, *pestoi*, *kuboi*, and fire signals (Alcidas *Od.* 22), while, by the time of Philostratus' *Heroicus* (second century C.E.), Palamedes had assumed the lineaments of a universal culture hero, responsible for inventing the seasons, the cycle of the months, the year, and coinage, as well as the traditional weights and measures, number, *pestoi*, and writing.

Finally, Plato has Socrates attribute a very similar list of inventions (including games) to the Egyptian god Theuth, in a famous passage from the *Phaedrus*. According to Socrates, Theuth "invented number and reckoning and geometry and astronomy, and in addition *petteia* and *kubeia*, and especially writing." Scholars have traditionally compared these lists to question the particular inventors, positing competing local traditions; or to trace the

9. See Goossens 1952, 150.

10. Though, as Goossens notes, Sophocles does not necessarily make the invention of games a palliative against famine in this fragment; instead, "releasing from famine" and the invention of *pestoi* and *kuboi* are separate elements in a list of benefactions, linked simply by τε in the second line. According to Eustathius (ad *Il.* 228.1 = 1346.17 Valk), they used to show the stone at Troy on which the Greeks played *pestoi*. Other fifth-century representations of Palamedes as the inventor of games: Eur. *IA* 195; Polygnotus, *Nekuia* in the Lesche of the Cnidians at Delphi (Paus. 10.31.1).

direction of influence in their constitution.¹¹ I am less interested in the specifics of individual lists than in the phenomenon in general: What accounts for the Greek fascination with such lists of inventions, and what is the common thread that unites their elements? Specifically, why do games figure so frequently in these inventories of culturally significant contributions? If we return for a moment to Gorgias' list, as the single most complete of those closest in time to Herodotus' list, we can observe two features that seem to characterize all its elements. First, each invention represents a symbolic signifying system which imposes itself as a kind of second-order organizing principle: military tactics organize fighting men; written laws structure the customary usages of the city; weights, measures, and number regulate material property; fire signals transform and communicate messages over long distances. Second, as Gorgias' rhetoric makes particularly clear, all these inventions are said to have a positive moral value in their service to the community. That is to say, there seems to be an intimate connection between each of these symbolic systems and the order of the Greek polis.¹²

This association of systems of symbolic logic with civic structure makes the final term in Gorgias' list all the more intriguing. I have thus far deliberately excluded the game of *pessoi* from my discussion of Palamedes' inventions and avoided offering any modern equivalent as a translation, in order not to prejudge what precisely the game is and how it fits in this context. To modern sensibilities, the games that adorn these lists (*pessoi*, or *pessoi* and *kuboi*) represent the odd men out, the strange intermingling of trivial with profound, and yet somehow their inclusion has a logic for Greek writers and audiences. How are we to understand the functioning of games in these inventories? Games are, after all, symbolic systems par excellence, and their collocation with military tactics, number, written laws, and coinage suggests that the Greeks themselves regarded them as such.

Finally, what are we to make of Herodotus' list of Lydian inventions in the context of these other catalogues of εὑρήματα? What emerges most forcefully from the comparison is the oddness of Herodotus' set—coinage coupled with prostitution and *kapêleia* rather than military tactics and written laws, and, as Herodotus emphasizes, all the games except *pessoi*. Are the anomalies of this list conditioned by Herodotus' notion of the oddness of the Lydians, and, if so, what is the symbolic significance of the games Herodotus specifies here?

I would like to place the development of games within a complex cultural and political struggle that I believe took place throughout Greece in the archaic period, between what I would call egalitarian and elitist traditions

11. Thus Lamer 1927, cols. 1906–8; Kleingünther 1933, 28–29; Wüst 1942, cols. 2505–10 (on Palamedes); Goossens 1952; Kemp-Lindemann 1975, 75–76.

12. This argument, which has traditionally been made for writing and the Greek city, has recently been challenged by Steiner 1994; she argues that several of the symbolic inventions on these lists—including writing, coinage, and fire signals—were strongly associated with Eastern despotism by sixth- and fifth-century Greeks. While Steiner's argument is a valuable corrective to the too-easy modern association of writing, written law, and democracy, the passages considered here suggest that, at least by Gorgias' time, the identification of these symbolic systems with the order of the polis was one available for a Greek audience.

within the Greek aristocracy.¹³ The egalitarian tradition supported the newly emergent polis or city-state as its source of authority; the elitist tradition, in opposition, founded its authority, its right to rule, on privileged links to the gods, the heroes, and the East. Each tradition had its own characteristic genres of poetry and performance, its own symbolic sites, and its own competing cultural systems. Thus I would say (very schematically) that the egalitarian position is characteristically expressed in the genres of iambic, (some) elegy, and choral lyric poetry, while the elitist tradition is articulated mainly in monodic lyric poetry. Going along with this, performances of the egalitarian tradition are public and civic; they occupy the agora, the marketplace and public assembly. In contrast, the private symposium and the *palaestra* (exercise grounds) are the symbolic sites of the elitist tradition. Finally, I believe that the elitist tradition tends to be essentializing, insisting on embodiment and innate nobility, while the egalitarian tradition values function and office above inborn quality or status.

It is within the context of this last opposition that I would like to consider games—especially the games of Herodotus' list of Lydian inventions. We could say that there are three different categories of games here—games that use the body (ball); games of chance (dice and knucklebones); and games of order (*pessoi*—board games). In the archaic period, the first two categories of games correspond to the elite sites of palaestra (where you play ball) and symposium (where you play knucklebones). The former category is about embodiment—ball games as the way you show off the virtues of the noble body, while the latter category entails an unmediated relation between the player who throws the knucklebones and the workings of “fate” or “the divine.” That is, I would suggest that what I've called “games of chance” are imagined as a kind of ordeal by those engaged in them.¹⁴ In the context of this system, what about board games (*pessoi*)?

Here, I need to pause for a methodological parenthesis. The reconstruction of ancient Greek games (especially board games) is extremely difficult and inconclusive, based as it is on brief allusions in literary texts from Homer onward and more extended accounts in much later commentators and lexicographers (Pollux, Hesychius, Suidas, Eustathius; some or all of which are dependent on a lost treatise of Suetonius, *On Greek Games*). These latter antiquarians write long after many of the games they attempt to identify have become obsolete, and in contexts where they are exposed to the very different system of Roman games—both facts that can distort the information they transmit. As one scholar observes, “Some of the difficulties may be realized by trying to reconstruct a game of Ombre entirely from Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, or a game of cricket from Dickens' account of All Muggleton v. Dingley Dell. . . .”¹⁵ Nonetheless, certain facts can be es-

13. Cf. Morris 1996 for the model of competing “middling” and “elitist” strands in archaic Greek poetry; for the application of Morris' model to another domain of practice, see Kurke 1997.

14. For a full discussion of the elite associations of “games of embodiment” and “games of chance,” see Kurke 1999.

15. The material in this paragraph represents a summary of Lamer 1927 and especially Austin 1940, 257–61. Quotation from Austin 1940, 257.

tablished with some probability. *Pessoi* and *petteia* function in our sources as generic terms, designating “board games” in general.¹⁶ *Pessoi* are specifically the pieces moved on the board, also called *lithoi* and *psêphoi*. Certain board games, at least in the post-Homeric era, entailed the use of dice (*kuboi*) as well as pieces on a board (*pessoi*), so that on occasion we find the terms *pessoi* and *kuboi* conjoined.

The term *pessoi* occurs once in all of Homer—in the *Odyssey*, where it characterizes the activity of the suitors of Penelope. It is worth tracing out the theme of games in the *Odyssey* in some detail, for it will establish the framework within which later symbolic references to *pessoi* also operate. In schematic terms, the suitors’ activity of games playing is consistently linked with their violations of *xenia*, their unscrupulous and one-sided consumption of another man’s household. That is to say, the playing of board games marks the suitors as bad aristocrats, engaged in disembodied activity that is itself equivalent to the vicarious enjoyment and expropriation of another’s property. It is thus characteristic of the suitors that they not only “play *pessoi*,” but stage a boxing match of beggars for their own amusement (Book 18) and imagine that Penelope is to be won in the contest of the bow (Book 21). Odysseus, in contrast, proves his nobility and asserts his proprietary and regal prerogatives by *re-embodying* the symbolic contest of the bow, forcing the suitors from game to real warfare, and there destroying them.

In our very first view of the suitors (through the eyes of Athena disguised as Mentēs), we catch them playing *pessoi* (*Od.* 1.106–12):

εὔρε δ’ ἄρα μνηστῆρας ἀγήνορας. οἱ μὲν ἔπειτα
 πεσσοῖσι προπάροιθε θυράων θυμὸν ἔτερπον,
 ἡμενοὶ ἐν ῥίνοισι βοῶν, οὓς ἔκτανον αὐτοί.
 κήρυκες δ’ αὐτοῖσι καὶ ὀτρηροὶ θεράποντες
 οἱ μὲν ἄρ’ οἶνον ἔμισγον ἐνὶ κρητῆρσι καὶ ὕδωρ,
 οἱ δ’ αὖτε σπόγγοισι πολυτρήτοισι τραπέζας
 νίζον καὶ πρότιθεν, τοὶ δὲ κρέα πολλὰ δατεῦντο.

And then she found the lordly suitors. They were then rejoicing their spirit with *pessoi* in front of the doors, sitting on the skins of cattle, which they themselves had killed. And their heralds and nimble servants—some were mixing wine and water in kraters, others in turn were cleaning the tables with sponges full of holes and setting them out, still others were dividing up many pieces of meat.

Here the suitors’ disembodied pastime is significantly associated with their vicarious appropriation of another man’s household: they lounge on the skins of Odysseus’ cattle they have themselves killed, drink his wine, and prepare to eat his meat. This first view is emblematic, marking through their activities the suitors’ transgression of the norm of embodied exchange in *xenia*. At the same time, their unproductive symbolic activity is accentuated by contrast with the bustle of servants in attendance, preparing a banquet for their idle masters.

16. Austin 1940, 260; Cilley 1986, 33–34.

The precise nature of the game they played was apparently the source of some speculation in antiquity, as we learn from Athenaeus (*Deipnosophistae* 1.16f–17b):

Apion of Alexandria says that he actually heard Cteson of Ithaca tell what sort of game the suitors played. “The suitors,” he says, “numbered one hundred and eight, and divided the counters (*psêphous*) between opposing sides, each side equal in number according to the number of players themselves, so that there were fifty-four on a side. A small space was left between them, and in this middle space they set one counter which they called Penelope; this they made the mark to be thrown at with another counter. They then drew lots, and the one who drew the first took aim. If a player succeeded in pushing Penelope forward, he moved his piece to the position occupied by her before being hit and thrust out, then again setting up Penelope he would try to hit her with his own piece from the second position which he occupied. If he hit her without touching any other player’s piece, he won the game and had high hopes of marrying her. Eurymachus had won the greatest number of victories in this game, and looked forward to his marriage with confidence.” In this way, because of their easy life, the suitors’ arms were so flabby that they could not even begin to stretch the bow (οὕτω δὲ διὰ τὴν τρυφὴν τὰς χεῖρας οἱ μνηστῆρες ἔχουσιν ἀπαλὰς ὥς μὴδὲ τὸ τόξον ἐντεῖναι δύνασθαι). (Trans. C. B. Gulick 1927–41)

Though this elaborate rendition of what is essentially a game of marbles may strike the modern reader as absurd, the ancient scholar has in fact picked up and expanded on the broader significance of this fleeting Homeric reference to the suitors’ playing *pessoi*. For what Cteson describes is ultimately a system of symbolic or vicarious wooing, whereby the suitors compete for the hand of Penelope not directly, but through the interaction of tokens. “Penelope” here unites in a single token all the property and prestige of Odysseus for which the suitors vie. Furthermore, the ancient commentator captures the essence of an Odyssean opposition in his final rationalizing note that the suitors’ constant pitching of marbles enfeebled their arms so that they could not string the bow. This slightly comic touch highlights the antipathy between the disembodied or symbolic games favored by the suitors and proper aristocratic contests of strength.

The final act in this drama of games and gamesmanship is, of course, the contest of the bow in Book 21. The suitors engage in what they imagine is a purely symbolic contest of strength and skill, even as they offer a series of escalating threats of violence to their social inferiors. And yet, finally, it is the suitors who become the victims, as Odysseus literalizes the game and makes them his targets. After the shot that wins the symbolic contest (the shot through the twelve axes), the “beggar” grimly calls for dinner (*Od.* 21.428–30):

νῦν δ’ ὦρῃ καὶ δόρπον Ἀχαιοῖσιν τετυκέσθαι
ἐν φάει, αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα καὶ ἄλλως ἐνιάσθαι
μολπῇ καὶ φόρμιγγι· τὰ γάρ τ’ ἀναθήματα δαιτός.

Now it is time to make dinner for the Achaians in the light, and then afterwards also to play with song and lyre: for these are the ornaments of the feast.

Odysseus engages in a last disturbing bit of metaphor, likening the slaughter of the suitors (which follows immediately) to the perennial uninvited feasts they have enjoyed, while he transforms them from banqueters to dinner.¹⁷ In this context, his use of the verb ἐπιάσθαι is striking; though here it is associated with the “play” or “entertainment” of “song and lyre,” its one other occurrence in the poem describes the suitors playing games “sitting at the doors or in the house itself.”¹⁸ Thus Odysseus’ brutally ironic words here on the verge of slaughter carry us all the way back to our first view of the suitors, idly playing *pestoi* as they consume another man’s household.

The *Odyssey*’s pattern of game and real violence constitutes an ideology of embodiment: noble men themselves make contact with *xeinoi*, participate in war or in the elegant athleticism of the Phaeacians. The suitors, in contrast, reveal their inadequacy in this system by their predilection for substitution. Their co-option of Odysseus’ house and property has nothing to do with *xenia*, since they barely reciprocate from the “body” of their own houses. All their behavior within Odysseus’ house is shaped by the same logic of symbolic substitution: they are perennially waited on by others; they enjoy the sexual services of the maidservants as a substitute for those of the mistress; and they use Odysseus’ servants and beggars as “pawns” in their sadistic entertainments. This whole array of inappropriate disembodied activity is communicated in shorthand the first time we see the suitors, by the significant detail that they are “playing *pestoi*.” The use of symbolic counters or tokens and the mediation of the symbolic space of the game board stand in direct opposition to the embodied ideals of Greek manhood.¹⁹ This conflict between an ideology of embodiment and symbolic activity represented by the game board endured in Greek literature, though, strikingly in the archaic and classical periods, we can trace a strand of thought that valorized the game in opposition to the bodily ideal of the elite.

In the archaic period, two distinct forms of *pestoi* (neither identifiable as the suitors’ game) appear to have their origin.²⁰ The first is a game which, according to Pollux, is called “polis” (Poll. *Onom.* 9.98):²¹

17. Stanford (1971, 2.370) notes the way in which the mention of dinner here recalls the poet’s own ominous reference to the “unlovely feast” prepared for the suitors by “a god and a mighty man” at *Od.* 20.392–94.

18. *Od.* 17.530–38, where again the suitors’ play is associated with their inappropriate consumption of the household goods. Apollonius Rhodius uses ἐπιάσθαι to describe Eros and Ganymede playing *astragaloi* at *Argon.* 3.118.

19. This is not to say that the *Odyssey* represents or endorses *only* what I have termed an “ideology of embodiment”; Odysseus and the text in which he figures are much more complex. Thus, for example, Odysseus as a bowman (especially one who uses poisoned arrows) himself controverts or problematizes an ideal of embodied warfare, or, in other terms, we might note how embodiment characterizes both those at the top and at the very bottom of the social scale (Odysseus as king and as beggar). For insightful discussions of the ideological tensions and complexities of the poem, see Rose 1992, 92–140; Thalmann 1998.

20. In the following summary, I rely mainly on the arguments and conclusions of Austin 1940, who emphasizes the need for great caution and exactitude in differentiating the various games played on a board. Contra Lamer 1927, cols. 1937–39, I do not find any good fifth-century evidence (as opposed to much later evidence) for the claim that the terms *pestoi*, *psēphoi*, *kuboi*, and *astragaloi* were used interchangeably in the sources.

21. Cf. Eust. *Od.* p. 1397.44–45 (ad *Od.* 1.107): “There is another form of game ‘polis,’ in which the taking of pieces occurs back and forth when many pieces have been disposed on spaces divided by lines. And

ἡ δὲ διὰ πολλῶν ψήφων παιδιὰ πλινθίων ἐστί, χώρας ἐν γραμμαῖς ἔχον διακειμένας· καὶ τὸ μὲν πλινθιον καλεῖται πόλις· τῶν δὲ ψήφων ἑκάστη, κύων· διηρημένων δὲ εἰς δύο τῶν ψήφων κατὰ τὰς χροάς, ἡ τέχνη τῆς παιδιᾶς ἔστι περιλήψει τῶν δύο ψήφων ὁμοχρῶν τὴν ἑτερόχρουν ἀναίρειν·

The game played through many pieces is a board that has spaces disposed between lines; and the board is called “polis” and each of the pieces a “dog.” The pieces are divided in two by color and the art of the game is to capture the other-colored piece by surrounding it with two of the same color.

As described by Pollux, this game functions within a general typology of board games as a “battle game,” played with many pieces (Photius tells us there were thirty on each side), as a game of skill without dice. Within the game, all the pieces appear to have been equal in status; that is to say, it is more like modern checkers than chess.²² As R. G. Austin reconstructs it, “The tactics consisted in preventing the enemy from maintaining his massed formation, and by breaking through it to manoeuvre until his force was gradually scattered and so taken. An isolated man brought danger to himself and to his side.”²³ It is probably “polis” to which Plato and Polybius refer as a game of strategy requiring great tactical skill. Philostratus too may have this particular game in mind when he characterizes *petteia* as “no idle game, but one full of wisdom and needing great attention” (οὐ ῥάθυμον παιδιὰν ἀλλ’ ἀγχίνουν τε καὶ εἴσω σπουδῆς, *Her.* 33.4).²⁴ We know that the game existed at least as early as the second half of the fifth century, since Pollux quotes a passage from Cratinus to illustrate the use of the terms *polis* and *kuôn* (Poll. *Onom.* 9.99 = Cratinus frag. 61 KA).

A second game, called *pente grammai*, remains much more obscure. As Pollux describes it (*Onom.* 9.97–98):

πέντε δὲ ἑκάτερος εἶχε τῶν παίζοντων ἐπὶ πέντε γραμμῶν, εἰκότως εἴρηται Σοφοκλεῖ, “καὶ πεσῶ πεντέγραμμα καὶ κύβων βολαί.” τῶν δὲ πέντε τῶν ἐκατέρωθεν γραμμῶν μέση τις ἦν ἱερὰ καλουμένη γραμμὴ· καὶ ὁ τὸν ἐκεῖθεν κινῶν πεττὸν παροιμίαν ἐποίει, κίνει τὸν ἀφ’ ἱερᾶς.

Each of those playing had five [*pessoī* or *psêphoi*] upon five lines, so that it is suitably said in Sophocles, “five-lined boards and the throws of the dice.”²⁵ And of the five lines

they used to call the lined spaces ‘poleis’ quite wittily, and the pieces opposed to each other ‘dogs,’ on account (I suppose) of their shamelessness.”

22. For the typology of board games, see Austin 1940, 259: “The simplest board-games of most countries are based on three primitive activities of man—the battle, the race, and the hunt—modern types of which are chess, backgammon, and fox-and-geese. Such types one would expect to find among the Greek games. . . . The object of the battle-game is to hem in one’s opponents and drive them off the board; no specified number of men or size of board is needed, and in the earliest forms of the game there is no differentiation of pieces; no dice are used. In the race-game, the aim is to bring one’s men to an appointed terminus and so be first off the board; again there is no differentiation, but the number of men is fixed, usually 15 on each side; dice are used to control moves. In the hunt, a single piece tries to escape from an opposing pack; no Greek or Roman game seems to have been of this type, which was common, however, in Scandinavia and among the early Celts.” On nondifferentiation or equality of pieces as a characteristic feature of Greek board games (as opposed to their Roman counterparts), see Lamer 1927, col. 1927.

23. Austin 1940, 264.

24. Cf. Pl. *Resp.* 487b, Polyb. 1.84 (all three references are drawn from Austin 1940, 261–66).

25. For the interpretation of this line, I follow Lamer 1927, col. 1914; Austin 1940, p. 268, n. 10.

from [on?] either side there was a middle one called the “holy line”; the one who moved the piece from there made the saying “move from the holy line.”

Eustathius adds that the “move from the holy line” was the last resort for a player who was being beaten, “whence the proverb . . . for people who are desperate and in need of final aid” (ὅθεν καὶ παροιμία . . . ἐπὶ τῶν ἐν ἀπογνώσει δεομένων βοηθείας ἐσχάτης, Eust. *Il.* p. 633.57–59 = 2.277.15–17 Valk). Unfortunately, these accounts do not provide enough detail to reconstruct the game with any certainty, and modern scholars debate the exact layout of the board and structure of play.²⁶ Thus, for example, it is unclear whether this game involved dice as well as pieces moved on a board; the combination of dice and board would make it typologically a “race-game” like backgammon. There is some evidence to suggest the use of dice in *pente grammai*, and we have ancient references to an unnamed game that combined the throwing of three dice (*kuboi*) with pieces moved on a board.²⁷ If these passages do not refer to *pente grammai*, they refer to a third distinct form of *petteia* whose name is unknown to us.²⁸

Even given the limited amount we can reconstruct about these games, their names and forms of play are suggestive. The regulated, rule-bound movement of pieces on a board appealed to the Greeks as an image for various forms of symbolic order. Thus Plato on one occasion, perhaps following Heraclitus, figures the creator of the cosmos as a *peossoi*-player (πεπτευτής) who disposes “parts for the sake of the whole” as he places different souls

26. For proposed reconstructions, see Becq de Fouquières 1873, 396–405; Murray 1952, 28–29. Lamer 1927, col. 1973 and Austin 1940, 267–71 refuse even to attempt a reconstruction (Austin observing grimly, “The obscurity of all this evidence is impenetrable” [268]). More recently, Cilley 1986, 41–55 has offered a new reconstruction, based largely on the study of twenty lined boards preserved in the archaeological record (Cilley 1986, 48–51, building on and expanding the catalogue offered by Pritchett 1968, 189–96).

27. Cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 32–33 (with notes of Fraenkel 1950, 19–22); *Ar. Ran.* 1400; a small painted clay model of a gaming board from Athens, now in Copenhagen (dated to the second quarter of the sixth century; see Breitenstein 1941, pl. 19, no. 171, reproduced in Pritchett 1968 as pl. 7.1); and the Execias amphora in the Vatican, on which Achilles and Ajax are clearly moving pieces on a board, but the words *tria* and *tesara* are inscribed coming out of their mouths (hence dice throws?; for discussion of this image, see pp. 261–63 below). *Soph. frag.* 429 R (cited by Poll. *Onom.* 9.97) may also support the use of dice in *pente grammai*, but only if we assume that the two halves of the line refer to a single game.

28. In one detail I would diverge from the cautious and sensible account of Austin 1940. One reference to the game of *pente grammai* in the scholia to Theocritus asserts that the piece moved from the holy line was called “the king” (βασιλεύς, Schol. ad Theocr. 6.18.19a). Most modern scholars (Austin among them) discount this bit of information, because it occurs in a context in which the scholiast asserts that the game referred to is ζαρκίκιον (“chess”), suggesting that the commentator is conflating an obsolete board game with a later game he knew (cf. Gow 1952, 2.122–23; Gow is inclined to credit the scholiast’s claim, though he acknowledges the difficulties). And yet, I believe there is early evidence that at least one form of *peossoi* involved a piece called the king: (1) In a famously obscure fragment, Heraclitus characterizes time (αἰὼν) as a “boy playing *peossoi*”: αἰὼν παῖς ἐστὶ παίζων, πεσσεύων· παιδὸς ἡ βασιλείη (“Time is a boy playing, playing *peossoi*; kingship belongs to the boy,” frag. B 52 DK). Though this fragment has generally been taken to refer to the arbitrary or random nature of events in time, C. Kahn suggests that it might be better understood as signifying the interaction of a randomizing force (throws of dice) with the rule-bound movement of pieces on a board (Kahn 1979, 227, citing Marcovich 1967, 494 for the suggestion that this game of *peossoi* involves dice). Kahn’s notion that Heraclitus’ game should combine throws of dice with pieces moved on a board may connect it with *pente grammai*, and, given this suggestive context, Heraclitus’ mention of “kingship” is striking. Perhaps in terms of the metaphor, “kingship belongs to the boy” because he controls the “king piece.” (2) This possibility may find confirmation in a brief fragment of Alcaeus quoted by Eustathius to illustrate the proverb, “move from the holy line”: νῦν δ’ οὗτος ἐπικρέτει / κινήσας τὸν ἀπ’ ἱρας †πατικνόν† λίθον (“But now this one rules, having moved the piece from the holy line,” Alc. frag. 351 V). If we

in different bodies (Pl. *Leg.* 903c5–e1).²⁹ According to Timaeus, *petteia* “was also sometimes called ‘geometry’” (γεωμετρίαν), and we are told that Clearchus likened the five pieces in *pente grammai* to the five planets.³⁰ In other contexts, *petteia* serves Plato as a favorite image for the process of dialectic (e.g., *Grg.* 461d1–3, *Resp.* 487b1–c3).

But of all the things the game board and pieces can signify, I would like to focus on the civic symbolism inherent already in the names and structure of these games. For the game called *polis*, this is clear; somehow the board is like the city whose framing structure endows its citizens with identity and equal status. In the case of *pente grammai*, the “holy line” as the midmost of five lines may evoke the temples and sanctuaries that tend to occupy the acropolis at the center of the city, so that the game board mimes civic geography.³¹ And whether it was *pente grammai* or some other board game that involved the use of dice, the combination of pure chance and movement on a board elegantly figures the mediation of the polis, which interposes itself as a screen between individual citizens and the devastating force of *tuchē*.³²

But the analogy between game and city works both ways. If the board game is somehow like the city for the archaic inventors and players of *pes-soi*, the converse is also true: being a citizen in a city is a symbolic activity like a game. It is this half of the analogy that radically unsettles the elite “ideology of embodiment” we traced in the *Odyssey*.

Indeed, an anecdote involving the philosopher Heraclitus may reflect a positive appreciation for the gamelike quality of civic action.³³ According to Diogenes Laertius (9.3):

Being asked to make laws [by the Ephesians], he disdained to do so, on account of the city's already being ruled by a wicked constitution. And [instead] he withdrew to the temple of Artemis and played knucklebones with the boys (μετὰ τῶν παίδων ἤστραγάλιζε). And when the Ephesians gathered around him, he said, “Why do you marvel, O worst of men? Is it not better to do this than to participate in the city with you?” (ἢ οὐ κρεῖττον τοῦτο ποιεῖν ἢ μεθ' ὑμῶν πολιτεύεσθαι;)

assume that this passage refers to the rule of Pittacus as elected tyrant or *aisymnêtês*, again the notion of a king piece on the board suits Alcaeus' metaphorical usage. The poet bitterly and dismissively characterizes his opponent as (merely) a pretend king in a board game. Indeed, the evocation of a *basileus* piece may have particular resonance if, as some scholars argue, the early tyrants used *basileus* as their title (see Pleket 1969, 21; Oost 1972; Ogden 1997, 148–51; for Pittacus in particular, this suggestion is supported by the language of a Lesbian grinding song preserved by Plutarch [= *Carm. pop.* 23/869 PMG]: ἄλει μύλα ἄλει/ καὶ γὰρ Πιττακὸς ἄλει / μεγάλας Μυτιλήνας βασιλεύων. [“Grind, mill, grind; for even Pittacus grinds, he who is king in great Mytilene”].) Admittedly, the combination of the use of dice with a king piece in a single game would contravene Austin's typological model (see n. 22 above), but it may be that this combination has a particular appeal in a Greek cultural and political context.

29. Kahn 1979, p. 328, n. 302 suggests that the Platonic passage is “haunted with Heraclitean reminiscences.”

30. For Timaeus and Clearchus, see Taillardat 1967, 150, 154.

31. For a particular Greek city that was designed to have five sectors, see Svenbro 1982 on Megara Hyblea.

32. Plato on one occasion uses the image of a game combining dice and pieces on a board to allegorize the proper relation of chance and reason in human life (*Resp.* 604c5–d2; cf. Plut. *Mor.* 467a–b).

33. For Heraclitus' positive valuation of the city and its laws, see Schottlaender 1965; Vlastos 1970, 70–73; Kahn 1979, 178–81; Seaford 1994, 221–28.

Like many Heraclitean sayings and anecdotes, this one draws its point from paradox, from the speaker's incongruous preference for children's games over the deadly serious activity of lawmaking. And yet, in a sense, the paradox is doubled: children's games are deadly serious to them, while "making laws" (νόμους θεῖναι) is itself a symbolic activity like playing a board game. It may be that Heraclitus is not opposing a game (ἡστραγάλιζε) to "real life" (πολιτεύεσθαι), but one kind of game to another, in an effort to teach his fellow citizens an object lesson. (Thus, perhaps πολιτεύεσθαι has a secondary meaning: "to play *polis*," like πεσσεύειν, "to play *pessoi*.") By his performance, the philosopher may imply that being a citizen in a polis means playing a game—engaging in symbolic activity—in deadly earnest.³⁴

We may find the culmination of this paradoxical structure, again invoking *pessoi* to characterize the symbolic activity of the polis, in a famous passage of Aristotle, which, in its complexity, needs to be quoted at length (*Pol.* 1.2.9–12, 1253a1–18):

From these things it is evident, then, that the city belongs among the things that exist by nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. He who is without a city through nature rather than chance (ὁ ἀπολις διὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐ διὰ τύχην) is either a mean sort or superior to man; he is "without clan, without law, without hearth," like the person reproved by Homer; for the one who is such by nature has by this fact a desire for war, as if he were an isolated piece in a game of *pessoi* (ἅμα γὰρ φύσει τοιοῦτος καὶ πολέμου ἐπιθυμητής, ἅτε περ ἄζυξ ὢν ὥσπερ ἐν πεττοῖς). That man is much more a political animal than any kind of bee or any herd animal is clear. For, as we assert, nature does nothing in vain; and man alone among the animals has speech. The voice indeed indicates the painful or pleasant, and hence is present in other animals as well; for their nature has come this far, that they have a perception of the painful and pleasant and indicate these things to each other. But speech serves to reveal the advantageous and the harmful, and hence also the just and the unjust. For it is peculiar to man as compared to the other animals that he alone has a perception of good and bad and just and unjust and other things [of this sort]; and partnership in these things is what makes a household and a city. (Trans. C. Lord 1984, with slight modifications)

As Austin observes, Aristotle's comparison of the *apolis* man to an "isolated piece in *pessoi*" almost certainly refers to the battle game of *polis*, in which a piece "has become cut off from the main force and so is in danger itself and a danger to others."³⁵ The man who is *apolis* has lost his place within the symbolic structure that gives him identity and endows his activities

34. The same analogy of civic governance and game may inform another anecdote preserved in Diogenes Laertius, as well as a fragment of Heraclitus' own writing: (1) When the Ephesians banished Heraclitus' friend Hermodorus, the philosopher said, "The Ephesians deserve to die, every grown man of them, and leave the city to the beardless boys" (Diog.Laert. 9.2); (2) Iamblichus tells us "how much better [than other theorists] did Heraclitus judge in considering the opinions of men to be [mere] boys' games" (πόσῳ δὴ οὐν βέλτιον ἢ παῖδων ἀθύρματα νενόμικεν εἶναι τὰ ἀνθρώπινα δοξάσματα, frag. B 70 DK). We might also recall the tradition that Heraclitus abdicated hereditary kingship in Ephesus in favor of his brother (Diog.Laert. 9.6)—is this the "wicked constitution" to which our anecdote refers? On Heraclitean performances, see Battezzare 1979, 9–25 and Steiner 1994, 22–23; cf. Martin 1993 on the analogous performances of the Seven Sages.

35. Austin 1940, 265; on the meaning of ἄζυξ, see also Tréheux 1958.

with sense; the polis, like the board, is the mediating structure that gives meaning to its citizens.³⁶

While the narrow context of Aristotle's comparison is military (it explains why "one who is such by nature" is a "desirer of war"), it is worth teasing out the broader implications of the image of *pessoi* for this passage. We can understand the whole paragraph as an elaborate, repeated unpacking or gloss on its opening paradoxical claim, that "man is by nature a political animal." The sentence that contains the image of *pessoi* reenacts the same paradox in its comparison of "one who is such *by nature*" to a piece in a game: How can something in nature be like a symbolic counter in a game? Aristotle proceeds to justify both paradoxes ("political by nature," "game by nature") by the argument that man alone of all the animals possesses *logos* and therefore the ability to perceive abstract concepts like good and bad, just and unjust. Thus the paragraph as a whole makes three claims: man is by nature a political animal; man is by nature a games-playing animal; and man is by nature a signifying animal. The implicit logic of the passage asserts the isomorphism of these three claims: to be one of these things is to be *necessarily* each of the others. We may read this as a recasting in terms of *nomos* and *phusis* of Heraclitus' paradox—polis is a game we play in deadly earnest.³⁷

We should note how far we have come from the *Odyssey*. There, "playing *pessoi*" is almost an unnatural act, opposed to the naturalized physical activity and embodiment of the good aristocrat. Four centuries later, Aristotle, the great theorist and apologist of the polis, can unselfconsciously justify the naturalness of civic order by invoking the symbolic activities of games playing and *logos*. In light of this double analogy—the board game is like a city, the city is like a game—it is easier to understand the recurrence of *pessoi* in the lists of symbolic inventions with which I began. If we return to Gorgias' list, we recall that the links we found among its terms (excluding *pessoi*) were that all the inventions represented second-order signifying systems and all were claimed to serve the common good. We can see now that these same features, according to Greek thinking, characterized board games: for (some) Greeks of the archaic and classical periods, playing *pessoi* taught the player how to be a citizen in the polis. For the game called *polis*, this was true in at least two senses. Narrowly understood, the rules and strategy of this battle game impressed on its players the importance of maintaining their place in the hoplite battle line rather than becoming ἄλλοι, "isolated" (and thus *pessoi* goes appropriately with military tactics, the first item on Gorgias' list). More broadly construed, the player learned what it meant to submit himself to the rules and symbolic order of the city which constituted him as a citizen equal in status to all other citizens.³⁸

36. Cf. Vernant 1988, pp. 136 and 437, n. 123 for a similar interpretation of the Aristotelian passage.

37. For other examples of *pessoi* used as an image in political contexts, cf. Aesch. *Supp.* 11–15; Ar. *Eccl.* 985–88; Pl. *Resp.* 374c2–d6. We find an intriguing turn on the image in Eur. frag. 360 N² [= frag. 50 Austin], and Pl. *Resp.* 422e, in which civic ideology constitutes its own essentialism. In these passages, *pessoi* serve as an image of bad—because diverse and arbitrary—polis structures.

38. In this context, cf. what Thucydides has the Corinthians say of the Athenians (as the extreme of democratic, imperial citizen character): according to Thucydides' speaker, the Athenians "treat their bodies as

It is perhaps in light of these symbolic associations that we should read the iconographic type of the board game-playing heroes, which enjoyed extraordinary popularity from the middle of the sixth century through the first quarter of the fifth. The representation of two armed heroes playing a game on a plinth set between them occurs as early as the mid-sixth century on carved seals and shield straps found in Aegina, Olympia, and near Tarentum in Italy. But the bulk of these scenes occur on Attic vases from approximately 540 through 480 B.C.E. (a recent inventory numbers 152 black-figure and 16 red-figure versions of the scene).³⁹ Perhaps the most famous of these images is that on a black-figure belly amphora by Execias, very close to the beginning of the series (c. 540–530 B.C.E.), currently housed in the Vatican.⁴⁰ On it, two warriors, identified by inscriptions as Ajax and Achilles, sit fully armed on low blocks, intently moving pieces on a board set between them. It is impossible to determine what game they are playing, though the words *tesara* (four) and *tria* (three) inscribed next to their mouths suggest that the game involves the throw of dice as well as pieces moved on a board.⁴¹

Archaeologists have speculated that the image may have a literary source in an episode from one of the lost cyclic epics, but I think this highly unlikely.⁴² Instead, I would suggest that the scene is invented in the sixth century as part of a civic appropriation of the Trojan War story—an attempt to translate the heroes of epic into the context of the polis. This civic appropriation (which has much in common with the practices of tragedy) would account for the extraordinary popularity of this type in the late sixth and early fifth centuries, as well as for the fact that Athena begins to appear in Attic versions of the scene once the iconography is established (according to Buchholz' catalogue, the goddess figures in 89 of the 168 known representations).⁴³ Finally, we should note that a marble statue group representing the same scene appears to have been dedicated on the Athenian Acropolis (as we know from fragments of it found in the *Perserschutt*).⁴⁴ It may be that this same impulse to appropriate the Trojan War saga for the world of the city informs the lists of Palamedes' inventions with which we began. As

if they were very much someone else's on behalf of the city" (ἐτι δὲ τοῖς μὲν σώμασιν ἀλλοτριωτάτοις ὑπὲρ τῆς πόλεως χρῶνται, Thuc. 1.70.6)—like pieces played in the city's games of conquest?

39. The information in this paragraph is drawn from Buchholz' catalogue of "brettspielenden Helden" (Buchholz 1987, 126–84; see p. 184, table 60 for statistics); cf. the catalogue of Woodford 1982, 181–84.

40. Inv. no. 16757 (344); *ABV* 145, 13.

41. On the indeterminacy of the game they are playing, see Lamer 1927, col. 1995; Woodford 1982, 184–85. Nonetheless, it is clear that the figures are moving pieces on a board, and this fact by itself makes impossible the interpretation of Boardman 1978, who connects this image with Herodotus' narrative of how the Athenian rebels at Pallene were defeated when caught unawares by Pisistratus' army as they were "playing *kuboi*" (Hdt. 1.63). Whatever Ajax and Achilles are playing, it *cannot* be *kuboi*. For other critiques of Boardman, see Hurwit 1985, 260; Buchholz 1987, 183–84.

42. Thus Kemp-Lindemann 1975, 85–86 (following Robert 1892, p. 57, n. 36 and Caskey and Beazley 1931–65, 2:2) posits the lost epic *Palamedeia* as source for the image; cf. Lamer 1927, col. 1994; Thompson 1976; Woodford 1982, 178–80 for skepticism about an epic source.

43. Buchholz 1987, p. 184, table 60.

44. See Schrader-Langlotz 1939, figs. 142, 160, and 168; Payne and Mackworth-Young 1950, figs. 121, 4 and 6; 124, 3 and 6. Schrader-Langlotz date the remains to c. 500 B.C.E.; for the argument that the two figures must be playing a board game on a plinth, see Deonna 1930; Thompson 1976.

military tactics, written laws, weights and measures, coinage, and *pestoi* progressively accrue to the Greek culture hero, the Plain of Troy comes to look more and more like a Greek city.

To return to the specifics of Exekias' image, I would suggest that this translation to the world of the polis is implied not just by the fact that the heroes wear hoplite armor and wield hoplite shields (which lean behind them in this scene), but also by the fact that they are represented *playing a board game*. Or rather, a game that combines dice and pieces moved on a board. The throw of the dice we can understand, with Jeffrey Hurwit, as an ominous sign of the fate that awaits the doomed heroes:

[I]t is not too much to suggest that the game of chance—the focus of the scene, on which all compositional lines (the spears, which themselves pick up the diagonal thrust of the handles, the fixed gaze of the eyes, even the oblique words *tesara* and *tria*) converge—is also a metaphor for fate. No Greek could have failed to observe that both heroes would die at Troy, that Akhilleus, the victim of Paris' arrow, would be carried from the field by Ajax himself . . . and that Ajax would fall on his own sword.⁴⁵

But what Hurwit's analysis ignores is that the heroes play not just a game of chance, but also a game of order: if the throw of the dice portends the doom which is beyond their control, the mediation of the game board reinscribes their individual fates within the structure and meaning of the larger civic order. In the familiar euphemism of the democratic city, to die in battle fighting for the polis is "to become a good man."⁴⁶

But, in order to be efficacious, this recuperating civic structure requires the complete identification of the individual warrior with the piece on the game board. It is finally this identification that Exekias' extraordinary image achieves. I quote Hurwit's masterful description of the composition:

In a panel framed by lustrous black glaze Exekias drew a symmetrical and deceptively tranquil scene of Homeric heroes at play. Akhilleus and Ajax . . . bend over a table, call out the roll of the dice . . . and move their pieces on the board. The silhouettes are like cutouts pasted over the undisguised red wall of the vase. And although the spears of Akhilleus disappear behind the table and those of Ajax cross in front, the scene is flat and seemingly backlit. The light ground is not read as air or space but as a neutral void pushing the figures forward to the surface: luminous, it shows through the incisions within the forms. It is as if the red ground were not considered part of the image. Moreover, the eye naturally equates the black pictorial forms with the glaze outside the panel, and so they seem as tightly surface-bound as the vase's ornamental black skin. The planarity of the image is complemented by clarity of contour and precision of line, and anyone who doubts the incising tool's capacity for lavish meticulousness need only study the heroes' hair, cloaks (the patterns are doily-like), and armor.⁴⁷

In Hurwit's description, the image invites us to see the flat cutout figures as pieces, the red ground as the surface of the game board. Indeed, we can take

45. Hurwit 1985, 260–61; cf. Vermeule 1979, 81–82; Buchholz 1987, 183–84; S. P. Morris 1997, 68–70; S. P. Morris and Papadopoulos forthcoming.

46. For the expression, see Loraux 1986, 3, 100–101, 104–6, 168; Gould 1989, 61–62; cf. Hdt. 1.95.2, 1.169.1, 5.2.1, 6.14.1, 6.114, 7.224.1, 7.226.1–2, 9.71.3, 9.75.

47. Hurwit 1985, 260.

this reading even a step further, once we note that, in Attica at least, *pestoi* were often made of ornamented bits of old pottery smoothed into circular shapes (figure 1).⁴⁸ Thus the highly patterned forms of the heroes' hair, armor, and especially their cloaks, articulating the shape of their bodies, are the *very stuff* of game pieces, to which the artist draws our attention by his elaborate incising technique. In content and in style, the image affirms that the heroes are played in the game of civic warfare even as they play on the board between them.⁴⁹

Let me now finally return to Herodotus 1.94—to the Lydians' invention of games. I have noted that Herodotus' list looks anomalous in light of other such catalogues of inventions; we are now in a position to appreciate the significance of the particular elements Herodotus conjoins. In terms of their associations, I have argued that knucklebones and ballgames are elite pastimes; yet Herodotus links these closely with the low-class activities of prostitution and retail trade, producing an unsettling fusion of the marketplace with the palaestra and symposium. I would contend that this vertiginous conjunction of what should properly be separate is characteristic of the Lydian ethnography as a whole. From Herodotus' perspective, what should be the mediating term and conversion mechanism between the extremes is the polis, which the Lydians conspicuously lack. And this lack is registered here by the exclusion of *pestoi*: the Lydians do not invent *pestoi* because they cannot conceptualize the symbolic order of the city. Hence the difference between Herodotus' list of Lydian inventions and the profusion of inventories with which we began. Those lists, as I suggested, have as their object the equation of polis structure with a whole inventory of second-order symbolic systems; Herodotus' catalogue, by contrast, intends just the opposite, exposing the schizophrenic conjunction of luxury and economic degradation when the informing principle of the polis is lacking. Thus Croesus' Lydians are emblems of luxurious living who prostitute their own daughters;

48. For game pieces made of pottery, see Lamer 1927, cols. 1901, 1997–98; Laser 1987, 126 and pl. 3c.

49. S. P. Morris and Papadopoulos (forthcoming) follow Vermeule (1979, 77–82) in seeing the iconographic type of the board game-playing heroes as an Egyptian import to Greece, whose main symbolic significance is eschatological. Thus the type of two figures playing a board game (in one instance with a female figure standing behind) occurs in Egyptian tombs from the Eleventh Dynasty (2000–1780 B.C.E.) on, while the moves of the Egyptian game of *snt* (or *senet*) were explicitly linked to the passage of the soul through the underworld on Egyptian game boards and in Egyptian texts (Vermeule 1979, 78–80; Cilley 1986, 5–9; Buchholz 1987, 182–83). All this endows the image of Ajax and Achilles (or two unnamed warriors) gaming with fateful resonances. I do not regard these two readings as mutually exclusive: the interpretation offered here is meant to supplement the eschatological reading, suggesting that Execias' image is complex and multivalent. Thus the iconography both acknowledges the heroes' vulnerability to fate or chance and recuperates their fated death within the ordering framework of the polis (just as the game combines the randomizing effect of dice with the strategic order of pieces moved on a board). I would note that the theory of cultural borrowing alone cannot account for (1) the sudden reappearance of the iconography, as well as real game boards in Greek burials, in the early archaic period for the first time since the Bronze Age (Vermeule 1979, 80–82; S. P. Morris and Papadopoulos forthcoming); (2) the transformation of the standing female servant of the Egyptian image into Athena; (3) the fact that with only three exceptions, all Greek representations of game players are hoplites (cf. Woodford 1982, 177, who notes that the iconography in no way requires this specialization). All three phenomena (which differentiate the Greek images from their Egyptian prototypes) seem to me explicable as the civic inflection of an eschatological theme. Thus we might see the process of cultural influence or borrowing as the superimposition of a distinctively Greek set of connotations on a preexisting Egyptian model.

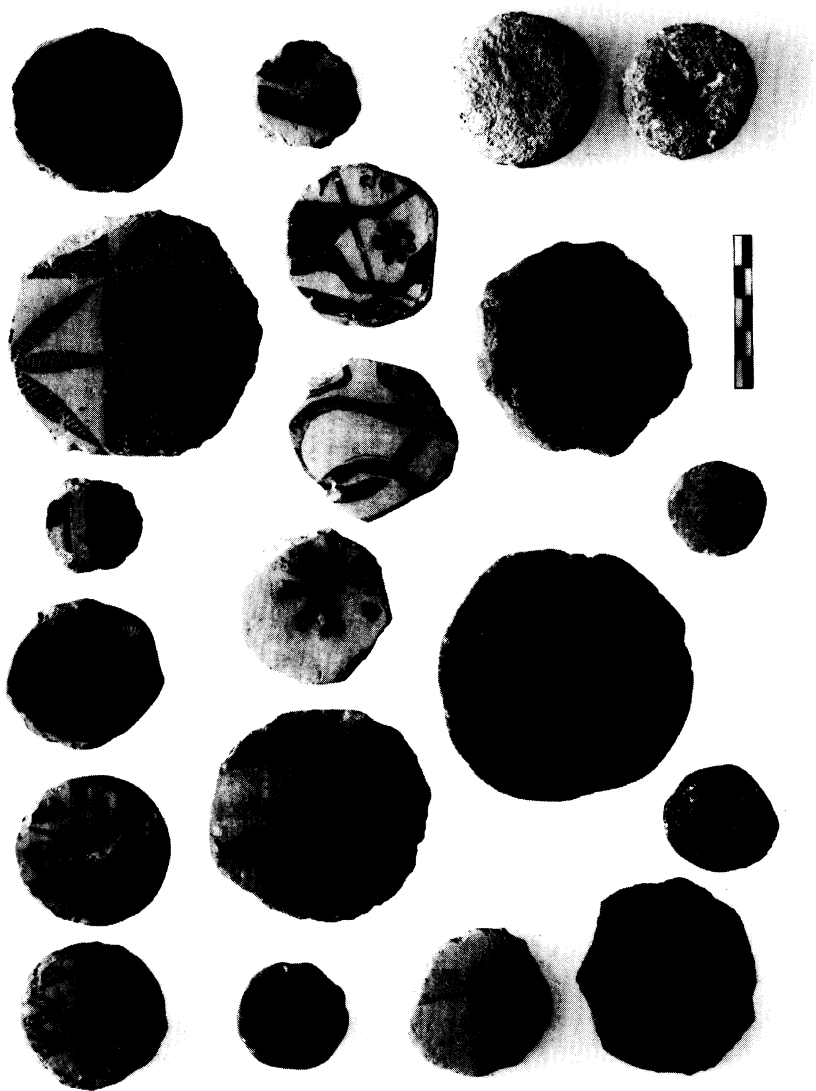


FIG 1.—Game pieces (*pessoi*) fashioned from geometric pottery fragments, found on the northern slope of the Athenian Areopagos. Athens, Agora Museum, inv. no. P 538, P 1793–95, P 471, P 1796–99, P 537, P 1800. Photo courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations.

recipients of a river full of gold who become the first minters of coins and the first retail traders.

In case we missed the point, Herodotus underscores it with his strange etiology of Lydian games. We might say that, without the polis, the Lydians do not and cannot invent games of order (*pessoi*), only games of chance (dice, knucklebones) and games of embodiment (ball). Thus the narrative of the invention of games is a story of the Lydians' submission to random fortune and physical deprivation for eighteen years. Finally, after eighteen years of bad luck, the Lydian king essentially invents *pessoi* through the bodies of his people. In the elaborately rehearsed division of the populace in two by lot, the king seems unwittingly to have devised a game of *polis* played with and on his subjects. And it is strikingly only at this point in the narrative that Herodotus finally attributes to the Lydians (now turned Etruscans) the "founding of cities" (ἐνιδρύσασθαι πόλιος, 1.94.6). In this passage, at least, games function as part of a material symbology through which Herodotus thinks political and economic structures and their interaction.

Thus in Herodotean ethnography, as in Aristotle's seemingly offhand simile and in the profusion of vase paintings of gameplaying warriors, we catch reflexes of a cultural pattern that I would contend preexists and informs these representations. The emergence in the archaic period of competing systems of games—games of order, games of chance, and games of embodiment—seems to go hand in hand with the emergence of new political, social, and economic structures. This is not to claim that a particular Greek individual or set of individuals consciously invented the game of *polis*, say, or *kottabos*, in order to reflect and reproduce the egalitarian order of the city or the hierarchical relations of the elite symposium; that would be to replicate the Greeks' own mythopoeic obsession with the *prôtos heuretês*, the "first inventor," as well as to succumb to an inappropriate language of intentionality. Instead, I would suggest that by a kind of social alchemy that is impossible to reconstruct in retrospect, cultural formations produce the practical apparatus through which they perpetuate themselves. Games are one such form of practice, doing their work more effectively because they are unassuming, trivial, and pervasive. Thus playing the board game *polis* might help form a Greek boy as a citizen of the city.

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