Work Hard, Play Hard:

Gameboards and Merchants' Way of Life in Middle Bronze Age Anatolia

Abstract

The study of gameboards in ancient West Asia has been revitalized by approaches foregrounding the social connections and new interactive spaces created by games such as Senet, Twenty-Squares, and Fifty-Eight-Holes. Often played between two people, these games can help explore the intimate rituals of social bonding and negotiation, particularly in diverse communities in which boundaries of class, gender, language, and geographic origins are continuously set, negotiated, and broken. Taking games as social lubricants (Crist, de Voogt, Dunn-Vaturi 2016) this paper will consider their role specifically within the diverse communities of the *kārum* network in Anatolia, where all extant boards are variants of the Game of ~~58-~~Fifty-Eight-Holes. Egyptian in origin and prolific throughout ancient West Asia, the presence of boards used for ~~58-~~Fifty-Eight-Holes at settlements within the *kārum* network is clearly associated with foreign presence. Integral to mercantile modes of being, gameboards represent a special category of material culture that carried a specific set of meanings and affordances and can therefore illuminate previously unconsidered dimensions of the encounters between Anatolians and Assyrians.

Keywords

gameboards, Anatolia, Old Assyrian, merchants, Middle Bronze Age, ~~*karum*~~*kārum* network,

Introduction

Gameboards are longstanding objects of fascination: their familiarity and tangibility engender the formation of intimate connections across space and time. From Flinders Petrie's initial publication of the Game of -Fifty-Eight-Holes (latter called Hounds and Jackals) in the 1890s, to Leonard Woolley's iconic reconstruction of the so-called Royal Game of Ur (see Finkel 2007), an example of the Game of Twenty-Squares, gameboards have provided opportunities for exploring the oftentimes ephemeral subjects of leisure and intimate social interaction through the material record.

Gameboards travelled lightly and rules and strategies even more so, moving along with an entire world of mobile people including soldiers, enslaved people, diplomats and messengers, and merchant caravans (Finkel 2008: 151). As has been noted, "good", or successful games, freed the players of inequalities stemming from deeply ingrained cultural knowledge and/or specialized skills; simple games of competition allowed the game to be endlessly repeated and shared freely across cultural and language barriers (Finkel 2008: 151). They are also easy to copy and reproduce cheaply (De Voogt, Dunn-Vaturi, Eerkens 2013), and can be manufactured

from local, inexpensive materials as well as more highly valued or foreign components. Gameboards are found inscribed into the landscape (Subramanian 2019; Finkel 2020: 54-544) and the majority of gameboards were most likely ephemeral in nature, scratched into the earth and now lost to the archaeological record.

Extant gameboards in Anatolia appear to be a variant of Fifty-Eight-Holes. The precise rules of the game are unknown, but it is recognised as a racing game

> "[...] for two players, each of whom had [their] own half of the territory. The goal of the race was the central hole at the top of the board. Each player's route consisted of ten holes that run down the centre portion to the lower edge, turning to one side to follow the edge of the board up to the top with a further 19 playing holes. Very commonly every fifth hole [...] is highlighted with a ring or other device to facilitate counting. Often there is an extensive space between the tenth and eleventh hole in the run of 29, sometimes marked by a very large hole. This point evidently marked a significant stage in the play" (Finkel 2020: 43-44).

Fifty-Eight-Holes probably originated in Egypt at the end of the 3rd millennium BC, spreading across the Near East during the 2nd and 1st millennia BC. The 2nd millennium distribution of extant boards shows the Game of Fifty-Eight-Holes was played in Iran (Susa), Mesopotamia (Nippur, Khafaje, Nuzi), the Levant (Megiddo, Beth Shean, Gezer, and Gerar), in addition to Egyptian examples from El-Lahun, Sedment, and Thebes (Dunn-Vaturi 2012b). More recently, Crist (cited in Finkel 2020: 53, n.3) has identified rock-cut versions in Azerbaijan, dated most probably to the 2nd millennium BC. ~~where?~~

The popularity of -Fifty-Eight-Holes across such a wide span, therefore, is not surprising. Board games could be adapted to the material resources and social contexts of one's own environs, but such innovations did not inhibit their widespread functionality and popularity (Finkel 20089: 151-54). That said, board games should not be thought of as some universal key for unlocking humanity's connectedness—they must be considered within their own social worlds.

All Anatolian gameboards dated to the Middle Bronze Age come from sites within the *kārum* network, suggesting that they were introduced by Syro-Mesopotamian agents during the course of long-distance exchange. While a Syro-Mesopotamian introduction is not conclusively proven (see Dunn-Vaturi 2019: 83 for an alternative origin via direct interactions with Egypt and/or Iran), Anatolian gameboards are very much in keeping with a broader assemblage of Syro-Mesopotamian material culture attested at *kārum* period sites, particularly Kültepe (Highcock 2018; Heffron 2021). ~~This assertion has grounding in other studies of gameboards and cultural interaction. For example,~~ Walter Crist (2012b) makes a similar case from well-attested foreign presence, ~~has~~ arguing ~~ed~~ that although the Egyptian game Senet was popular in the Levant, it is mostly strongly associated with periods and places that coincided with the presence of large numbers of Egyptians engaged in copper mining or imperial activities. These objects are not, however, simply ~~foreign items attesting to~~the by-products of long-distance contacts. As in the case of the Egyptian miners and soldiers of the Levant, they represent a very specific category of material culture that would have carried a very specific set of meanings in the context of encounters between locals and foreign merchants living in Anatolia as part of long-distance trade networks.

We argue that it is not only possible, but necessary to view Anatolian gameboards as a small but conspicuous repertoire of objects whose affordances, social and symbolic significance, and extrinsic value not only place them within a broad framework of interregional contact, but also point to foreign presence of a specifically mercantile character. In other words, Anatolian

gameboards constitute an idiosyncratic proxy for cross-cultural exchange, distinct from but compatible with other strands of evidence pointing to the transfer of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and customs.

Historical context

At the beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE, merchants from Assur organized and maintained an extensive trade network in Anatolia 1000 km northwest in which they transported textiles and tin to Anatolia in exchange for silver, and less often, gold. At its height, the Assyrian merchants established around 40 commercial settlements in Anatolia, the best known of which was at Kaneš, modern Kültepe near Kayseri. Excavations at Kültepe have yielded an unparalleled quantity of data including nearly 24,000 archival cuneiform texts constituting the largest corpus concerning long-distance trade and its many participants in the ancient world.

Although the cuneiform archives generated by the Old Assyrian long-distance trade network have been rigorously studied since the mid 20th century, producing an incredibly rich picture of the multicultural and mobile world of MBA Anatolia, it is only the last two decades that other categories of material culture have been methodically re-assessed within a framework of cultural interaction and identity formation and mediation (Stein 2008; Larsen and Lassen 2014; Highcock 2017, 2018). Recent innovative studies include those on foodways (Atici 2014; Fairbairn 2014; Fairbairn and Wright 2017), seal iconography (Lassen 2014, 2017; Larsen and Lassen 2014), manufacture and sealing practices (Lassen 2014; Topçuoğlu 2014), textile production (Thomason 2013, Lassen 2015), personal adornment (Highcock 2019; Michel and Kulakoğu 2021), and religious paraphernalia and graves in domestic contexts (Heffron 2014, 2016, 2017, 2020)2). Analysis of human remains has also enriched our understanding of the movement and interaction within Anatolia (Üstündağ 2014; Yazıcıoğlu-Santamaria 2017). Gameboards provide us with another avenue in which to truly explore how people actually related to one another in the day-to-day—how did they do business together, make friends, resolve (or create!) differences in these third-culture communities?

Earlier studies of gameboards in the ancient eastern Mediterranean and Middle East have focused on deciphering the rules of the game they represent and on determining their origins and subsequent diffusion or transmission. More recently, however, several scholars have begun to ask different questions of these objects, moving away from discussions of the where and when of ancient games and instead focusing on the social act of gaming itself. A more theoretical approach to gameboards, developed in the work of scholars such as Walter Crist (2021a, 2012b; Crist, de Voogt, Dunn-Vaturi 2016), Anne Elizabeth Dunn-Vaturi (2000, 2012a, 2012b, 2019), Alex de Voogt (Crist, de Voogt, Dunn-Vaturi 2016; de Voogt, Dunn-Vaturi, Eerkens 2013) and Carl Walsh (2016) centers on the active role of gameboards as

> [...] social lubricants in cross-cultural 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.

Unlike liminal spaces, which inverse social roles to reify the status quo, liminoid spaces are “an imaginary borderland where boundaries of inclusion and exclusion can be negotiated” (Crist, de Voogt, Dunn-Vaturi *et al.* 2016: 180). Social lubricants such as boardgames can forge new relationships and new possibilities. The element of chance allows for different outcomes every

time. In the mercantile world of risk, chance, misfortune, and profit in which identities and power hierarchies must have been in constant negotiation, gameboards provide a material grounding in exploring these social dynamics.

Complete and fragmentary gameboards have been found in central Anatolia at the sites Kültepe, Acemhöyük, Konya-Karahöyük, and Boğazköy; all once home to communities of long-distance merchants from Assur and elsewhere in Syro-Mesopotamia. Although comprising a relatively small corpus, they represent a diversity in archaeological context and material, which in turn reflects their rich and dynamic social settings across these settlements.

Archaeological context

Kültepe

Two gameboards have been reported from Kültepe (see Table 1). One is a clay board from “the house of an Assyrian merchant” in Level II (Fig.1). Its exact context was not published in Özgüç’s 1986 excavation volume.

The other, a fish-shaped board made of gray tufa (Fig.2), was discovered on the floor of Room 1 in the Level Ib house on grid square U-V/23-25 (Özgüç 1955: 58). This five-roomed house possessed an ordinary set of domestic furnishings and utensils such hearths, storage vessels, cooking ware, and grindstones. Most of these were concentrated in Room 4, which must have served as a general kitchen/work area in the form of a central courtyard (possibly partially covered, as many houses are assumed to have been). Özgüç (1955: 55-56) also reports “pottery typical of Ib” for the inventory of this house but does not identify specific finds. In addition to quotidian household activity, the presence of a bird-shaped ritual vessel suggests that members of the household also engaged in ritual practices (Özgüç 1955: fig.14). Household ritual practices evidently extended to funerary rites, given the large number of sub-floor graves: five stone cists and two pithoi distributed across four rooms (Akyurt 1998: Şek.94c). In short, the house is a fairly typical, relatively wealthy Lower Town residence. Özgüç later attributes this house to an Assyrian merchant (Özgüç 1986: 77) presumably due to the presence of cuneiform tablets (number unspecified, one sealed) in Room 1. Another item of Mesopotamian origin is a duck weight also recovered from Room 1. Inferring ethnic affinity on the basis of artefacts, however, is problematic. Shifting focus to a *mercantile* identity, on the other hand, is much more useful in assessing the gameboard in its immediate archaeological, as well as wider social context. The presence of tablets and a duckweight already hints at mercantile involvement of a member or several members of the household.

Acemhöyük

Four gameboards come from Acemhöyük, two of which have been recovered from controlled excavations, both found inside the same room of the Sarıkaya Palace, in grid square NA-OA/46 (N Özgüç 1966a: plan.1).

One is a small fragment of an ivory board with gold inlay for the large hole (Fig.3); the other is made of ~~Egyptian blue~~blue tufa, also inlaid with gold for the larger holes (Figs. 4a-b). Two more ivory fragments (Figs., reconstructed into a single board, ~~on display~~identified among the Pratt

Ivories almost certainly also came from the same room (N Özgüç 1966b: 46; T Özgüç 1986: 82; Dunn-Vaturi 2012b).

The room in NA-OA/46 appears to have been a basement storage room of the Sarıkaya Palace, a sizable administrative building with evidence of an extensive conflagration. The excavator reports that while some of the rooms had been emptied of their contents prior to the fire, others still contained various objects, notably sealed bullae and luxury items. The gameboards are certainly to be included in the latter category if for no other reason than the precious materials used in their manufacture, which sets them apart from their modest counterparts recovered from Kültepe. The ivory fragments especially bear a close resemblance to Egyptian examples, in keeping with other precious items with Egyptian/Egyptianising attributes also found at Acemhöyük.

This does not, however, necessarily suggest a direct Egyptian contact as proposed by de Voogt *et al* (De Voogt, Dunn-Vaturi, Eerkens 2013: 1718). as Egyptian motifs in Anatolia at this time can be more plausibly explained by Syrian mediation (Aruz 2008: 82). A contrast between the Acemhöyük and Kültepe gameboards is also evident from context, as the former have almost certainly arrived at Sarıkaya Palace as prestige items within the sphere of elite exchange whereas the latter were probably circulating among a mercantile class as personal belongings, or perhaps even made in Anatolia. The gameboards from the Sarıkaya palace remind one of much later 'elite' versions of the Game of Fifty-Eight-Holes~~58 holes~~ which demonstrate how the materiality of gameboards, that is the relationship between the human agent and the affordances of the physical object, could transform in different settings. In an ~~one~~ example from Nineveh (Curtis and Reade 1995), the board is carved from red marble and the peg holes are embellished with incised rosettes. The edges are carved with a procession of humans, winged-figures, and quadrupeds and an inscription provides Esarha~~r~~ddon's titulary and ownership of this object.

We also have two fragments of more 'humble' gameboards made of fired clay (Figs.6-7), also from Acemhöyük REFS?. One was discovered in the northern court area in front of the Sarıkaya Palace, and the other in another storage space in a service building. Although manufactured from the inexpensive material of clay, in terms of context these two fragments align with their luxury counterparts in coming from contexts in and around administrative activity associated with the movement of people and circulation of goods.

Konya-Karahöyük

The gameboard from Konya-Karahöyük (Fig.8) is only very cursorily reported (Alp 1978: 535). ~~REFS?.~~ Described as manufactured of white marble, it was discovered in a residential building from Level I, corresponding to Kültepe's level Ib, so somewhere between the late 19th and the early 17th centuries BC (see Gülalp 2008: 45-46). Its resemblance to the fish-shaped Kültepe board is quite striking.

Boğazköy

Information on the gameboard from Boğazköy (Fig.9) is similarly limited, other than that it is made of limestone (Bittel 1937) ~~REFS?~~. Although dated to the Late Bronze Age by Hoerth (1961), Gülalp (2008: 54) proposes an earlier Middle Bronze Age date, perhaps contemporaneous with Kültepe's level Ib (*ca.* 1833-1690? BCE).

Table 1

Site	Level	Date	Context	~~Inventory No.~~ ~~Add present location/museum?~~ Excavation and/or Museum Inventory No/s.	Material	Dimensions (cm) / Number of holes	Comments	Bibliography
Acemhöyük	III	19th-18th c. BCE	Sarıkaya Palace, room in NA-OA/16	Excavation: Ac. E/37 Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara: ~~(Excavation)~~ 69-24-66 ~~(Museum)~~	~~Egyptian blue~~Blue tufa ~~-~~and gold inlay for large holes	3.8 x 7.8 61 holes (reconstructed)	Fragment	Finkel 2008: 153; Özgüç 1966: 20, fig. 3; Özgüç 1986 pl.132/8
Acemhöyük	III	19th-18th c. BCE	Sarıkaya Palace, room in NA-OA/16	Excavation: Ac/ F 5 ~~-~~Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara: 158-5-67	Ivory and gold inlay for large holes	4.7 x 1.2 x 1.3 61 holes (reconstructed)	Fragment with fire damage	Özgüç 1966: 20, 46-7; Özgüç 1986; 82-3, pl.62/2a-b
Acemhöyük	III?	19th-18th c. BCE	Almost certainly from Sarıkaya Palace, room in NA-OA/46?	36.70.37g 36.70.37.a2	Ivory	4.3 x 6.6 x 0.6 2.8 x 4.3 x 0.3 61 holes (reconstructed)	Two fragments reconstructed into single board	Özgüç 1966: 46-7, pl.XXI/1; Dunn-Vaturi 2012b
Boğazköy		late 19th-early 17th c. BCE			Limestone	DIMENSIONS? Holes?		Bittel 1937: 22, pl.14/13
Konya-Karahöyük	I	late 19th-early 17th c. BCE	Residential building		Marble	DIMENSIONS? Holes?		Alp 1978: 535; Özgüç 1955: 331; Özgüç 1986:82
Kültepe	II	1972-1836 BCE	House of an Assyrian	Excavation: Kt 83k/ 83 Kayseri Museum:~~(Excavation)~~ 83/183 ~~(Museum)~~	Clay	17.3 x 8 x 3 61 holes		Özgüç 1986: 81-83, pl.132/9; Michel 2011: 90
Kültepe	Ib	1833-1690 BCE	House of an Assyrian	Excavation: Kt f/K 329 Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara:~~(Excavation)~~ 15021 ~~(Museum)~~	Tufa and lead inlay for large holes	8.6 x 7.4 x 2.8 61 holes		Özgüç 1955: 58, figs.16a-b; Özgüç 1986: 81-83, pl. 132/7; Michel

Integrating theory and data

In the multicultural context of Anatolian towns hosting foreign merchants, the function of gameboards as a social lubricant would no doubt be particularly heightened. It is not difficult to imagine gameboards being brought out at family gatherings as well as in business transactions, helping transcend cultural and linguistic barriers and eliminate feelings of dubiosity, apprehension, or social awkwardness on both sides. Particularly in the context of business, a friendly game at the start or conclusion of negotiations could be an effective means to dispel tension. A round of ~~58~~ Fifty-Eight-Holes~~holes~~ preceding negotiations could be a useful means for each side to assess the other's strategic behaviour, offering valuable insight into their opponents' potential strengths and weaknesses. At the conclusion of negotiations, if one party were to come out far more profitably than the other, a friendly game in which the former tactfully lets the latter win, could restore a sense of balance between the two, help maintain a sense of good relations, and make future business more likely. In general, games could also provide a proxy setting for business, similar to the trope of the executives and high-flyers making contacts, pitching projects, and shaking on deals whilst playing golf.

We know Assyrian merchants to have employed a variety of social and business strategies to manage cross-cultural borders, at times preserving and at others blurring them. If, therefore, a given situation called for emphasising a distinct sense of Assyrian-ness, gameboards could serve as useful props of displaying exoticism (as a positive social message), or perhaps even exclusivity (as a negative one).

For example, entering marriages with local women was certainly a way in which Assyrians embedded themselves more securely within Anatolian society (Stein 2008; Heffron 2017). Anatolians too would have drawn social capital from intermarriage, especially if they wished to display familiarity with the resident expatriates as a mark of prestige. On the other hand, the case of the Anatolian Luhrahšu, whose Assyrian colleagues conspire to prevent him from entering the caravan circuit, shows how lines of exclusivity could be drawn specifically along ethnic lines in order to preserve Assyrian monopoly over trade Depending on the situation, therefore, participation in a Mesopotamian game – or even the invitation to play – could send subtle social messages of acceptance or rejection. The cultural lines would not be blurred, as such, but maintained to delineate all the more clearly who was allowed beyond them and who was not.

Gameboards as a social lubricant must also be considered in the gendered perspective. The household archives of Kültepe's lower town reveal that certain Assyrian and Anatolian (as much as ethnicity can be delineated in such mixed communities) women were heavily involved in the business of long-distance exchange (Michel 2020). Michel has demonstrated that the face-to-face interactions of women with their male business counterparts varied but some individuals did enter into direct negotiations. For example, in a letter from the Assyrian merchant Aššur-nādā to his Anatolian *amtum*-wife Šišahšušar, he advises her to be tough in negotiations, including threatening jail time, with two fellow merchants who have not paid their debts. Assyrian wives could represent their ~~husban~~usbandds back home to various business associates and the local Assyrian authorities (Michel 2020: 256). Moreover, women engaged in business with other women; there is as of yet no evidence that the game Fifty-Eight-Holes was only played within the

male sphere. Whether in public business settings, or within the privacy of the domestic sphere, one can imagine that women engaged in games for both business and pleasure.

Recently, Irving Finkel (2020: 45) wrote he "suppose[d] that *Fifty-Eight Holes* was, at least in origin, an upper class women's game" chiefly because he considers it a game "largely devoid of competitiveness and tension." The logic behind why the (presumed) absence of competitiveness and tension in a board game ought to appeal especially to wealthy women is founded in class and gender stereotypes. Likewise the corollary that "[i]n contrast, the developed game of *Twenty Squares,* at home in a bar, barracks and bazaars, with wagers centering on beer, meat and women, reflects a preponderantly male world" (Finkel 2020: 45, n. 13) – a statement easily contradicted by evidence amply attesting to the presence and active agency of women in drinking establishments (Assante 1998: 31ff; Langlois 2016) as well as in broader commercial and business settings (Lion and Michel 2016).

Just like with any other social tool, games and gameboards almost certainly held implicit and/or explicitly gendered meanings, identifying which would no doubt enhance our understanding of the ancient communities in which they were enjoyed. The fundamental question of whether certain games were considered especially appropriate for women is indeed one of key significance. Such a line of investigation, however, can only make a meaningful contribution if pursued along an inferential line of reasoning.

Such a line of reasoning is not evident in the suggestion that Fifty-Eight-Holes was most likely originally developed by elite women from "a menstrual reckoning device deployed by royal wives and companions in the ancient palace equivalents of the later *harem* or *zenana*" (Finkel 2020:46). In a compelling demonstration of the persistence of Orientalist fantasies (Ali 2015) in modern scholarship, Finkel elaborates:

> "Counting the days of the month for women who were lying around waiting at the disposal of the king and needed to know whether they were going to be fit for purpose, so to speak, who would be crucial, especially given that fear of menstrual blood is likely to have been as deep-seated in Middle Eastern antiquity as it has traditionally remained in the Abrahamic religions. It is easy to imagine that girls in the same boat might enjoy a semi-competitive rivalry with regard to progress through their measured days, and it is but a step from that to a *harem* game with dice to hand and a few more pegs" (Finkel 2020:46).

It is peculiar that one of the most common reasons for cycle-tracking, namely for women to gain some degree of control over their own bodies either through achieving or avoiding pregnancy, is entirely unconsidered. Instead, the argument implies, unsatisfactorily, that the chief and sole reason for women to be so invested in tracking their menstrual cycles that they ended up developing a board game, was to spare men from the risk of coming into contact with menstrual blood.

While many cultures past and present, perpetuate variously justified aversions against menstruation, this is by no means a universal phenomenon, as is often erroneously assumed (Couto-Ferreira and Garcia-Ventura 2014: 121). More specifically in the context of the ancient Middle East, the association of menstruating women with impurity is not readily borne out by cuneiform evidence but rather derives from unwarranted Biblical parallels, criticised by Couto-Ferreira and Garcia-Ventura (2014: 123) as a "wilful misreading of sources [...] to impose the purity/impurity binary on women."

It is also not convincing that "the sequence of 29 track holes ending in the 30th must be highly suggestive." While the average length of a menstrual cycle *is* generally accepted as 28 days,

modern medicine considers a normal cycle to be anywhere between 21 to 35 days. While it would be useful for a woman to have a sense of the average length of her cycles, it is not clear why a fixed length of 29-30 days dictated by a tracking device would ever be important or necessary to the extent that it becomes a point of competition, especially since we are to rule out competition for a "women's game."

Given the demonstrable unclarity even for the ~~the~~ terms for 'menstruation' in Sumerian or Akkadian, and the fact that "data on the social management of menstrual periods, menarche, menopause and vital events of the life cycle in general are far from recogniseable in cuneiform sources" (Couto-Ferreira and Garcia-Ventura 2014: 124) we can safely dismiss Finkel's proposal.

At any rate, Finkel's argument for the origin of the game does not concern the dynamic and mixed social milieu in which this game was played during the Middle Bronze Age in Anatolia. Nor does it address the conspicuous variation in Anatolian gameboards, all extant examples of which are equipped with 61 rather than ~~58~~ Fifty-Eight-Holes~~holes~~. As suggested by N. Özgüç (1966: 20-22), the additional three holes appears to be a local Anatolian variation. This is in keeping with Crist *et al.* (2016: 181) and De Voogt, Dunn-Vaturi, Eerkens' (2013a) work which demonstrate that while the transmission of games is governed by high fidelity, innovations tend to take place when games cross cultural boundaries (Crist~~, Dunn-Vaturi~~, de Voogt, Dunn-Vaturi 2016: 181; De Voogt Dunn-Vaturi, Eerkens 2013). It is reasonable to think that the Game of ~~58~~ Fifty-Eight-Holes, once introduced into Anatolian society, was modified by local players to suit their own tastes and preferences.

An alternative explanation attributes the modified Game of 61 Holes to the needs of the foreigners instead. Michel has observed that

> [t]he positions of the holes, their number, and their two different sizes suggest that these game boards could perhaps have been used as computing tools or to note intermediary values during a mental computation in the sexagesimal system (Michel 2011: 91).

This system would have been part of specialist scribal training, and those who did not possess it – such as merchants who ordinarily did their sums with the simple decimal system – would have required a computational tool (Michel 2006: 14).

If indeed used for such a purpose, gameboards with 61 holes fall squarely within what Postgate terms the "hardware of trade" (Postgate 1992), namely the material correlates of mercantile activity pointing specifically to the presence of traders, even when the items of trade may be absent from the archaeological record. In this scenario, boardgames are not only a social lubricant for facilitating business and personal interactions in mercantile contexts, but are transformed by requirements of a particular profession.

A final consideration is the role of gameboards beyond the spheres of family life and business transactions, as vehicles of wider political interaction. The high-end boards from Acemhöyük prefigure the elaborate gameboards as prestige items circulated within Late Bronze Age networks of elite gift exchange. Notably, T. Özgüç has argued for viewing the Acemhöyük boards as evidence of cultural emulation of Mesopotamian customs by the Anatolian elite:

> "The local wealthy class and the aristocrats who established close relationships with local princes and foreign merchants tried to follow Assyrio-Babylonian fashions, increase their standard of living, live like them, use cylinder seals, and even learn Assyrian."

While this observation is very much in keeping with the role of gameboards as vehicles of social lubricants and cross-cultural transmission, it is curious that Özgüç confines it exclusively to the elite sphere, asserting that “the locals have continued to lead their lives according to their own customs.” Having attributed both the Kültepe gameboards to Assyrian households, T. Özgüç clearly distinguishes these objects as foreign material culture and separates them from the lives of Anatolians. While gameboards discovered in *kārum* period sites were originally foreign objects brought to Anatolia via foreign mediation, there is no reason to assume their use was exclusive to the elite sphere, least of all in the mixed households of Kaneš. Perhaps the use of gameboards as computational devices *was* a primarily Assyrian activity, but as objects of leisure, gameboards would surely have entered the lives of ordinary Anatolians. There is no reason to confine Anatolian gameboards of 61 holes to separate elite *vs* ordinary contexts. More recently, Carl Walsh (2014, 2016, 2020) has highlighted the function of gameboards as teaching aids for codes of behaviour, particularly in an elite context.

Spatial context

Outside elite contexts of gift exchange, the primary setting for playing board games and the creation of a liminoid zone was almost certainly the domestic house, which was the physical as well as the social space in which wider trends of cross-cultural interaction, admixture and hybridity regularly played out at Kanesh (and by extension other Anatolian kārums). Finkel (202~~0~~1:45) argues that Fifty-Eight-Holes~~58 holes~~ does not lend itself to simply being “scratched on the ground and played with improvised pieces” like other contemporary games, and must therefore be played indoors, with a board and pieces prepared specifically for this purpose in advance. Even if we were to “rule out the element of spontaneity” as Finkel (202~~0~~1: 45) suggests, this should not necessarily confine the game to indoors, as portable games could be taken and played wherever players wished. Indeed, Crist~~, Dun-Vaturi~~, de Voogt, Dunn-Vaturi (2016: 182) make a far more compelling case for busy public spaces such as markets (ruled out by Finkel) to have constituted an equally popular “physical space[s] in which multiple games are played [and] people gathered occasionally or continually through time to play games.” Stationary game boards have been discovered in public squares are a case in point. For Kaneš, the most likely candidate for such a space of performative game-playing would be the shrines (*hamrum*) of Assur and Ištar, at which Assyrian merchants regularly concluded business deals by swearing an oath to the emblems of the god or the goddess. Already imbued with a sense of liminality between the human and the divine worlds, such shrines would have been suitable also for the liminality of game-playing.

Conclusion

The communities of MBA Anatolia involved in the Old Assyrian trade network were cosmopolitan centres comprising locals and foreigners with different religious beliefs, social practices, business and legal practices, and speaking different languages. Previous studies of the archives and material culture of -Kültepe-Kanesh and other sites have sought to investigate the ways in which different groups both overcame these obstacles, forging hybridized or new third cultures, and reified their differences. These series of choices, this negotiation, was an ongoing process enacted in different ways by different individuals and across the social, economic, and political spheres. In such a dynamic setting, gameboards–themselves material

proxies for negotiation, competition and alliance– are a rich corpus of objects through which to explore a specifically mercantile social world.

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List of Figures

Figures 5a-b. Gameboard fragment. Acemhöyük**,** Sarıkaya Palace Rooms 19-20 in NA-OA/46. Level III (19th-18th c BCE). Ivory with gold inlay, 4.7 x 1.2 x 1.3 cm. Drawing by Neil Erskine after T. Özgüç (1986).

Figure 6. Gameboard fragments 36.70.37a2 (left) and 36.70.37g (right). Probably Acemhöyük. 18th c BCE. Ivory, 4.3 x 6.6 x 0.6 cm and 2.8 x 4.3 x 0.3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Drawing by Virginia Verardi. Open access: www.metmuseum.org.

Figure 7. Gameboard fragment. Acemhöyük Service Building, Room 7 in RA/38. Level III (19th-18th c BCE). Fired clay. Drawing by Neil Erskine after Öztan (1991).

Figure 8. Gameboard fragment. Acemhöyük, Sarıkaya Palace North Court, UA/42. Level III (19th-18th c BCE). Tufa. Drawing by Neil Erskine after Gülalp (2001 8).

Figure 9. Gameboard. Konya-Karahöyük, residential building. Level I (19th-18th c BCE). Marble. Drawing by Neil Erskine after Gülalp (2001 8).

Figure 10. Gameboard. Boğazköy-Hattusa. 2nd millennium BCE. Limestone. Drawing by Neil Erskine after Bittel 1937.