DEBUNKING THE DIFFUSION OF *SENET*

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Senet—perhaps the most famous of all the games of antiquity—has captured the imagination of scholars and lay people alike. Recognized as a game played by the Egyptians since the beginnings of archaeological research, and one of the first ancient games to be recognized outside of Greek and Roman texts, it has been one of the most discussed games of antiquity both in academia and in popular media. Nevertheless, understanding of this game remains incomplete. New evidence and more nuanced interpretations of old evidence continues to expand on our knowledge of *senet*. This paper seeks to correct some of the misconceptions about the game, which often seek to trace the development of later board games to *senet*. Furthermore, it aspires to encourage scholars from all disciplines who study games to critically reevaluate common conceptions of games relevant to their regions and time periods.

Factoids

It is not uncommon in historical, archaeological, or anthropological research to encounter what are sometimes referred to as factoids. Coined by Norman Mailer (1973: 18), the term factoid refers to a piece of information that, when repeated many times over a period of time, becomes accepted as fact (Mailer 1985: 32). These may be guesses, exaggerations, assumptions, or even complete fabrications which gain veracity because they are asserted many times. Through time, they become accepted as true, and become repeated by ever more eminent individuals, lending further credence to the claims. It is not uncommon to encounter factoids in historical, archaeological, and anthropological work, as scholars from the early years of these disciplines were often less measured in their conclusions than today. The prevalence of such factoids was demonstrated in the case of fifth century BCE Cyprus, in which historical and archaeological data were shown to be largely lacking for many of the narratives that were frequently cited as true for that period (Maier 1985).

Senet, as a game that has been the subject of much speculation throughout the history of Egyptian archaeology, is perhaps not surprisingly the subject of several factoids in archaeological, historical, and games literature. Whether relating to the longevity of the game, the way it was played, or to its relationship to other games, the speculation around *senet* is very great and has led to a considerable amount of misinformation, even in the scholarly literature. Therefore, a fresh look at the evidence for *senet* in Egypt and the neighboring regions in which it was also played is necessary to address some of the persistent factoids about *senet*.

The Oldest Game

A popular assertion is that *senet* is the oldest, or the first, board game. To begin, the assumption that scholars have, or even could, identify the first board game misunderstands how the great majority of games have been played throughout the world. Throughout the world, it has been observed that, most frequently, when people want to play a game, they have done so by creating a board on the ground in a spot suitable to them—often a shady place. This results in the majority of games being produced as lines or holes in sand and soil, which are of course undetectable in the archaeological record. Furthermore, the objects used as pieces during game play—seeds, pebbles, shells, even animal dung—are likewise not archaeologically visible, or at least not recognizable as game pieces when found.

The assertion that *senet* is the oldest game is because of claims that a Predynastic (3800–3500 BCE) clay gaming table and conical pieces from el-Mahasna (Ayrton and Loat 1911: 30) is the earliest known *senet* game (Kendall 1978:7; Pusch 1979: 156–7; Vandier 1952: 406). Other scholars have rightfully noted that the squares on the gaming table form a pattern of three by six, rather than the canonical three by ten that comprises the game of *senet* (Needler 1953: 63; Piccione 1990: 35). Some even question whether it was a game, suggesting that it was an offering table with votive garlic bulbs (Eyckerman and Hendrickx 2011: 414). The earliest appearance of *senet* in the archaeological record is probably the twenty-five ivory squares found in Tomb M1 at Abu Rawash (Montet 1946: 185), dating to the First Dynasty (ca. 3100–2900 BCE), three of which are marked in similar ways to later *senet* boards (Piccione 1990: 382). The first intact boards appear at Early Bronze Age II (3080–2700 BCE) Arad in southern Canaan (Sebbanë 2001),

which was heavily involved in trade with Egypt (Sowada 2009). It is shortly thereafter depicted in the Third Dynasty (2686–2613 BCE) tomb painting of Hesy-Re, alongside *mehen* and the game *men* (Quibell 1913: 18–21).

Though *senet* appears in Egypt indeed at an early date, *mehen* appears to be older. While *mehen* boards are rare, and most of them are unprovenienced and thus without a reliable date (Crist et al. 2016b: 17–24), an early board in miniature from Tomb 19 at Ballas (Petrie and Quibell 1896: 42), dating to the end of the fourth millennium BCE (Rothöhler 1999: 11), is stylistically very similar to three other boards without provenience (Egyptian Museum JE 27354, Petrie and Quibell 1896: 42; Bode Museum 13868, Scharff 1926: 145; Petrie Museum UC20453, Petrie 1914: 25). The Predynastic date of the Ballas *mehen* predates the earliest evidence for *senet* (First Dynasty), and so *mehen* is the oldest positively identified board game in human history.¹

Levantine Origins

In a seminal article demonstrating the clear presence of *senet* at Tell Arad in the southern Levant, Sebbanë (2001: 224) suggests that *senet* could have originated in the Levant, rather than in Egypt. This claim is made based on the fact that the earliest complete *senet* games were found at the site, dating to the Early Bronze Age II period (Sebbane 2001: 213), predating the earliest complete manifestation of *senet*—in the Hesy-Re tomb painting. Nevertheless, evidence pointing to an earlier date for *senet* in Egypt comes not only from the aforementioned fragmentary game boards, but also in the appearance of a three-rowed game in as the hieroglyphic symbol *mn*, which has an even older date, from at least the time of Narmer (c. 3100 BCE; Petrie 1901: Plates XIII, XIV, XXIII).

Furthermore, the appearance of *senet* in the Levant is typically contingent on an increased Egyptian presence. At Tell Arad, there is considerable evidence for Egyptian activity at the site, largely connected to the copper trade (Ilan and Sebbane 1989). When the Egyptians seized control of the copper mines in the Sinai Peninsula, they ceased contact with Tell Arad and the city eventually was abandoned. Instead, Egyptian activity

¹ For discussion of the claims of mancala games in the Neolithic, see Depaulis 2020.

in the Levant turned toward the coast, where Egyptian ships were sailing up the eastern shores of the Mediterranean to procure cedar in what is now Lebanon (Stager 2001), forming a colony at Byblos (Gale et al. 2000: 349; Sowada 2014: 293–294, 301–302). At this time, *senet* games appear along the Levantine littoral, including at Tell es-Safi (Shai et al. 2014:38, Fig. 11.1a), as well as at Byblos itself (Dunand 1954: 310; 1958: 531, 573, 661). Later, *senet* appears in the Levant again, e.g., at sites such as Kamid el-Loz (Meyer 1986: 126–136) and Hazor (Yadin 1960–: 6, 34) during periods of Egyptian imperialism in the region. *Senet*'s presence in the Levant is consistently explained by heightened Egyptian activity in the region, and there is little to suggest that *senet* was indigenous to the Levant.

This stands in contrast to Cyprus, where *senet* was adopted toward the end of the third millennium BCE (Swiny 1986; Frankel and Webb 2006: 246). Egypt was never intensively involved in Cyprus as it was in the Levant prior to the Ptolemaic period, and so the game seems to have been introduced and indigenized to the island (Crist et al. 2016b). The continued and regular interaction that Levantine individuals had with Egyptians, and presumably the times they played *senet* with Egyptians, reinforced the status of this game as an Egyptian one, whereas Cypriots likely rarely, if ever, interacted with an Egyptian person, let alone played games with them. *Senet* persisted in Cyprus at least until the end of the Bronze Age, counter-intuitively, because it was disconnected from Egypt to a greater extent than the Levant was. The process of indigenization that *senet* underwent in Cyprus is in stark contrast to that in the Levant, where it seems the game was only used as a social lubricant to interact with Egyptians when necessary (Crist et al. 2016a: 181–182), even from the first appearance of the game at Tell Arad.

It should also be noted here that the famous Enkomi game box in the British Museum (Murray et al 1900: 12–14), sometimes misattributed to *senet* (Pusch 1979: 307–308; Piccione 1990: 429–430), has the distinct pattern for the game of twenty squares instead (Crist 2019: 10–11). Tatton-Brown (1988: 28) incorrectly states that "the bottom of the box was marked out for the game of Senet." Indeed, the bottom surface was not found during excavation (Murray et al. 1901: 12, 31, Plate 1), and the bottom panel is blank (personal observation).

Ptolemaic and Roman *senet*

Egyptological literature discussing *senet* is virtually unanimous in its proclamation that the game was played in Egypt until Roman times, but corroborating evidence for this is ephemeral. The most concrete evidence that is cited are three graffiti games on the roof of the pronaos of the Temple of Dendera, which dates to the Roman period. Any *senet* graffiti on the roof of a Roman temple would point to the persistence of *senet* to some point in time after the roof was built. Piccione (1984: 175; 1988: 51; 1990: 449–451), who identified the graffiti, notes that it takes the form of a series of concavities in the surface of the roof, a highly unusual rendering of *senet* not seen before. *Senet* has been found as graffiti on Egyptian monuments, but as scratched lines forming the characteristic three by ten grid (Piccione 1984: 175; 1990: 384–390; Jacquet-Gordon 2003: 78, 84). In many cases, these incised graffiti also contain diagnostic markings inside the playing squares. The rendering of the graffiti on the roof of the Temple of Dendera is more reminiscent of Cypriot or early Levantine *senet*, both of which had not been played for roughly a millennium before this graffiti. Unfortunately, Piccione does not describe the patterns present, except for one which has “2 rows of 10 each, and a third row, unfinished—with 5 squares laid out unevenly with the other rows. The latter are only shallowly hammered” (Piccione 1990: 450). Neither have Piccione’s photographs or drawings of the depressions (Piccione 1984: 175) been published, so it is not possible to independently confirm that these cupules form *senet* patterns.

It is important to note that graffiti games are rather common throughout Egypt, and many of them appear on Pharaonic or Roman monuments, but are actually much later in date. One of the first to describe graffiti games in Egypt was Parker (1909: 644), who misattributed games etched onto the roof of the Temple of Kurna as Pharaonic, when they are obviously games that are Roman or Islamic in date. Indeed, many games found throughout Egypt which take the form of a pattern of depressions can be identified as the modern games *tab* or *sigā* (Crist et al 2016b: 151–166), pecked into the rock surface by recent people and unconnected with the original occupants or users of those spaces. The work of the Gebel el-Silsila Project, which has found Pharaonic, Roman, and modern games at various sites (de Voogt et al. 2020). Verification of the form the pattern on this roof

takes is required before any assertion can be made to extend the play of *senet* into Roman Egypt.

The next latest evidence cited for the game of *senet* comes from the Tomb of Petosiris at Tuna el-Gebel (Piccione 1990: 184–186, 288–289; Cherpion et al. 2007: 33, 40), during the Ptolemaic Dynasty, around 300 BCE (Sales 2016: 180). The tomb is decorated in a remarkable hybrid style, combining Egyptian, Hellenic, and Persian motifs. The two *senet* scenes appearing in the tomb are thus unique when compared to other *senet* scenes from Pharaonic Egypt (Decker and Herb 1994: 642–81). While one of the game boards pictured is shown in a side view, thus not revealing the pattern of squares on the playing face, the other displays a pattern of three by eleven. While Egyptian artists were not always precise about representing the strict three by ten pattern of *senet* even during the Pharaonic period, it should be noted that a three by eleven game was present in Egypt at least during the Late Period—though the playing spaces were typically rendered as circles rather than squares (Petrie 1927: 55; Crist et al 2016b: 77–80). In addition, the playing pieces on the board stand in stark contrast to those typically seen on *senet* boards from earlier periods. Conical and spool-shaped pieces were typical for *senet* playing during the entire documented history of the game, but those shown on these boards are low, rounded domes. This shape might be considered to be more reminiscent of Greco-Roman game counters (see, for example, Schädler 2009: Figure 5). Indeed, in the scene which displays the squares of the game board, the player sitting to the right is holding a piece in his hand, in the act of moving it, and the thinness of the piece is readily apparent in the scene.

The text accompanying this scene states: “Taking recreation in playing with his friends after lunch, until the time that he is purified in the beer chamber, by the Greatest of the Five, Petosiris” (Piccione 1990:186), a description that is remarkably unique in all of the texts about *senet*. Texts usually include exclamations of the players, or a passage reflecting the religious nature of the game. This completely quotidian description of play is highly unusual with regard to *senet*, and may further point to a different game being played in this scene. It is also accompanied by a fragment of the Great Games Text, though Piccione (1990: 185–186) expresses the possibility that this is a composition “which actually represents contemporary ideas and beliefs, or it is simply a copy of an older genre

which reflects concepts that were obsolete at that time.” In addition, the name of the game is never actually identified in the tomb.

It is of further note that the latest positively dated *senet* game boards come from the fortress at Tell Defenneh (Petrie 1888: 74; Crist et al 2016b: 61–62). Though published by Petrie, they had not been located when Piccione (1990: 444–445) and Pusch (1979: 370–371) wrote about *senet*, and so there was some question as to their correct identification as this game, but they are now readily visible on the British Museum website and display the canonical three by ten pattern and, indeed, some of the diagnostic markings in the playing squares. These objects date to the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty (664–525 BCE). Graffiti at the Temple of Karnak on the boat ramp of Taharqo ((690–664 BCE)) may also have a relatively late date (Piccione 1990: 442–444) but as mentioned before, graffiti can be difficult to date precisely. Therefore, the latest unequivocal date for *senet* is the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty. Petrie (1927: 52–53) gives the dates of several other games as from the Twenty-Sixth to Thirtieth Dynasties, but without explanation or adequate provenience to rely on these dates as accurate.

Senet’s Influence Abroad

Senet—and sometimes the Royal Game of Ur—is not uncommonly cited as a game from which later games are directly derived (Schädler 2004: 128–129). Whether modern games, such as chess, mancala, or backgammon or other ancient games such as *pente grammai*, *ludus latrunculorum*, or *XII scripta*, claims that they are derived in some way from *senet* are made so as to connect these games with a past in deep antiquity and thereby connect them with some level of prestige. These claims, however, are not based on archaeological evidence.

In the case of Greco-Roman games, the assertion is connected to Socrates, quoted in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (274c–d), which states that in Naukratis, the Egyptian god Thoth invented *petteia* and *kubeia*—terms used for board and dice games in the Greek world—along with numbers, letters, mathematics, geometry, and astronomy. There is, nevertheless, little evidence for *senet* being played anywhere in the Aegean world. The Greek game of *pente grammai* appears in a mid-seventh century BCE gaming table from Anagyros in Attica (Kallipolitis 1963: 123–4, 172), and is found consistently as artifacts, in literary references, and as graffiti throughout the

Greek world into the Byzantine era (Schädler 2009). While this overlaps with the latest confirmed date of *senet* by roughly a century, *senet* has never been found in Greece, nor was it ever mentioned by name in any Greek texts. *Pente grammai* is the only game of those mentioned as a potential successor game of *senet* to have any chronological overlap, and is therefore the only game with any plausible direct relationship. There are three stones from Bronze Age Crete with a three by ten pattern, two on a block that was part of the Royal Tomb of Isopata, now destroyed, and another on the eleventh step on the east flight of stairs of the theatral area at Knossos (Hillbom 2011: 104–109). If these are indeed *senet*, they would date to the Late Minoan II, and are thus at least a 700 years before the appearance of *pente grammai*. Cyprus, as mentioned above, is replete with evidence for *senet* play during the Bronze Age, but at the beginning of the first millennium BCE *senet* is noticeably absent from the archaeological record and remains so for the rest of Cypriot antiquity.

Nevertheless, the differences between *pente grammai* and *senet* are too great to be attributable to cultural transmission of a game from Egypt to Greece. Examining two popular games of the Ancient Near East, 20 squares and 58 holes, it was discovered that games changed very slowly, and were transmitted with remarkable fidelity when passing to new cultures, and only very slowly over time did games change (de Voogt et al 2013: 1728–1729). Similarly, chess, when introduced to Europe probably around the tenth or eleventh century, largely maintained the same rules—and sometimes the same abstract pieces—that existed in the Islamic world. During that period, medieval manuscripts suggest some experimentation with the movement rules for the queen and the bishop, foreshadowing their later development (Taylor 2011). It was only during the sixteenth century that the modern rules of chess appeared and became widely played, transforming the game into what we recognize today.

Pente grammai, a game with an unknown number of pieces, seemingly played with dice, and played on a series of five lines, with the pieces placed on the ends of the lines, is very dramatically different from the three rows of ten squares on which *senet* was played. While both were likely race games, this is the only clear similarity between the two games. It is therefore, unlikely that it was directly derived from *senet*. Indeed, it is far more likely that it was an indigenous invention in Greece. We do not see any period of overlap, or a presence of *senet* in Greece which gradually turned into *pente*

grammai, as one might expect. Indeed changes can be seen in *pente grammai* through time into the Byzantine period, where it becomes less likely to be drawn as a series of lines and more commonly rendered as a two by five pattern of squares or depressions. Nothing like this exists for *senet* and any other game of antiquity, and so it cannot be said that *senet* played any large influence on the development of other games in the region, let alone around the world and in much later time periods.

Conclusion

Discussions of *senet* have been plagued with factoids for quite some time now. Because the game plays an outsized role in the minds of scholars and laypeople interested in games, misconceptions about it have wide effects in the games studies field, as well as within the disciplines of ancient history, archaeology, and by extension history and anthropology. But now, as more information has come to light—and as old information has become clarified and more precisely understood—some of the persistent factoids about *senet* can be reevaluated, refuted and refocused into contemporary paradigms. Such approaches should embrace both cultural transmission and independent invention through the nuanced interpretation of archaeological and historical data to achieve better reconstructions of the relationships between games and people in the past.

While game boards travel across cultural boundaries very easily, they also have been independently invented in most parts of the world, such as *liubo* in China, *patolli* in Mesoamerica, and *chaturanga*, the ancestor of chess, in India. Hyperdiffusionism as a cultural explanation for the dispersal of cultural practices has been out of vogue in anthropology for many decades now, though the dispersal of cultural practices can be used as an explanatory mechanism when the evidence provides for it (Storey and Jones 2011). While recognizing that ideas and practices can be adopted by other cultures, it is crucial not to overemphasize such adoptions and to mistakenly conjure an origin point from which all board games spring. The root of many of these factoids about *senet* are based on such outdated approaches to the study of history, archaeology, and anthropology. Proclaiming *senet* as the oldest board game is an attempt to convey a sense of hallowed antiquity to

the game, extending its longevity past the point the evidence can support. Connecting it to the games of Mediterranean antiquity and to some of the most popular games of the modern world then brings those games into that lineage. Games had and continue to have importance in the cultures they are played, precisely because they are connected to those cultures, not because they are particularly old or connected to antiquity. They convey meaning among their players, bring people together to interact, and provide places where people can cross social boundaries in many ways. The cultural processes that games inhabit and enable are the interesting, important, and under-examined social importance of games, and better explain their influence within and between cultures.

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