

# A PLAYFUL *COROPLAST*? A NEW LOOK AT THE TERRACOTTA GROUP OF THE EARLY ROMAN BOARD-GAME PLAYERS NAM 4200 AND RELATED FINDS

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**Abstract.** The paper aims to offer a new look on the published early Roman terracotta group of the National Archaeological Museum inv. no. 4200, which is comprised of a male and female couple of board-game players in the company of a dwarf, by reanalysing its figures, board-game type and presenting some of its hitherto unknown details in the form of impressed images made by the coroplast on the back of the two player figures. These impressed images, if intentional, meaningful and not random, together with parallel finds, are examined in the light of information they can offer regarding the board-game type represented in the terracotta group, the possible winner of the game or gaming attitudes related to the gestures of the figures. An overview of relevant Roman and earlier literary sources and comparisons with related finds are included. Instances of ceramic, terracotta, metal or other finds with -random or intentional- impressed signs and symbols made in coroplastic or pottery workshops, as well as examples of post-manufacture graffiti by a possible user are presented and investigated, leading to possible interpretations of ludic concepts represented by the figural synthesis of the terracotta group NAM 4200.

Terracotta-group, Roman, Athens, game-board, bird (goose), flower

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**Περίληψη.** Το άρθρο αυτό στοχεύει να προσφέρει μια νέα οπτική στο δημοσιευμένο πήλινο σύμπλεγμα ειδωλίων του Εθνικού Αρχαιολογικού Μουσείου με αρ. ευρ. 4200, των πρώιμων ρωμαϊκών χρόνων, που αποτελείται από ένα ζευγάρι παικτών – μία ανδρική και μία γυναικεία μορφή – ενός επιτραπέζιου παιχνιδιού παρουσία ενός νάνου. Στο κείμενο αναλύονται εκ νέου οι μορφές, ο τύπος του επιτραπέζιου παιχνιδιού και παρουσιάζονται ορισμένες άγνωστες μέχρι τώρα λεπτομέρειες υπό την μορφή εμπέστων απεικονίσεων που έφτιαξε ο κοροπλάστης στην πίσω όψη των μορφών των δύο παικτών. Αυτές οι εμπέστες απεικονίσεις στην περίπτωση που είναι εκούσιες, νοσηματοδοτημένες και όχι τυχαίες, εξετάζονται μαζί με παράλληλα ευρήματα υπό το πρίσμα των πληροφοριών που μπορούν να προσφέρουν ως προς τον τύπο της τράπεζας παιχνιδιού που αναπαρίσταται στο πήλινο σύμπλεγμα, τον πιθανό νικητή της παρτίδας ή τις συμπεριφορές κατά την διάρκεια του παιχνιδιού, που σχετίζονται με τις χειρονομίες των μορφών. Συνοψίζονται επίσης συναφείς ρωμαϊκές και πρωιμότερες φιλολογικές πηγές, και γίνονται συγκρίσεις με παρόμοια ευρήματα. Περιπτώσεις αγγείων, πήλινων ειδωλίων, μεταλλικών ή άλλων αντικειμένων με – τυχαία ή εκούσια – εμπέστα σημεία και σύμβολα κατασκευασμένα σε κοροπλαστικά ή κεραμικά εργαστήρια, καθώς και παραδείγματα επιγραφών που χαραχθήκαν μετά την όπτηση από κάποιον πιθανό χρήστη, παρουσιάζονται και διερευνώνται οδηγώντας σε πιθανές ερμηνείες των αντιλήψεων του παιχνιδιού, που αντιπροσωπεύονται από την διάταξη των μορφών του πήλινου συμπλέγματος EAM 4200.

Πήλινο σύμπλεγμα, ρωμαϊκό, Αθήνα, τράπεζα παιχνιδιού, πτηνό (χήνα), άνθος

**Riassunto.** L'articolo si propone di offrire una revisione del già edito gruppo conservato al Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Atene (inv. no. 4200) ed attribuito all'età romana, composto da una coppia di giocatori (un uomo ed una donna) impegnati in un gioco da tavolo in compagnia di un nano. Nel testo si prendono in esame le figure dei giocatori, il tipo di tavola da gioco ed alcuni dettagli sinora ignorati, rappresentati dai motivi impressi dal coroplasta sul retro di due figure. Tali motivi, verosimilmente intenzionali e non casuali, vengono esaminati insieme ad evidenze analoghe, con l'obiettivo di dedurre informazioni riguardo al tipo di gioco rappresentato, al possibile vincitore ed alle reazioni degli altri giocatori deducibili dai gesti dei personaggi. Il contributo offre, inoltre, una panoramica delle fonti letterarie di età romana e precedenti, oltre che confronti con reperti affini. Vengono discussi manufatti in ceramica, terracotta, metallo o

altri materiali con segni e simboli – sia casuali che intenzionali – impressi in laboratorio durante la fase di produzione, così come esempi di graffiti post-produzione riconducibili ad un possibile utente. Questo tipo di approccio permette di avanzare alcune proposte interpretative riguardo al gioco documentato dal gruppo NAM 4200.

Gruppo di terracotta, romano, Atene, *tabula lusoria*, uccello (oca), fiore

### Introduction

Games of strategy and luck played with pieces (*pessoi*) on a marked board (*pesseia* or *petteia*) are considered as some of the most popular ancient types of games among many peoples and civilizations. In Greece, this type of game is mentioned in the *Homeric* poems<sup>1</sup> and in ancient drama. Different theories about the origin of board games existed among the Greeks. According to one myth, games were invented by *Palamedes* while the Achaeans had to wait in Aulis, in Boeotia, on the coast opposite Euboea,<sup>2</sup> for the right wind to sail to the Troad for the Trojan War or during the long siege of Troy.<sup>3</sup> Herodotus claims that the Lydians invented board games, while Plato testifies on their Egyptian origin.<sup>4</sup> In Greece, some of the early instances of clay game-board models come from sanctuary deposits, such as the models from the sanctuaries of *Hera Akraia* and *Hera Limenia* at Perachora in the Peloponnese that are dated to the early 7th century BC.<sup>5</sup> Clay game-board models and other game pieces found in ancient sanctuaries were apparently

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<sup>1</sup> Od., 1.106-107.

<sup>2</sup> Eur., *IA*, 192-199.

<sup>3</sup> Soph., *Palamedes*, frg. Nauck2 236, no. 435; Plin., HN, 7, 57. On Palamedes, as a symbolic hero-figure in various fields of ancient Greek religion, cognition and imagination, see VESPA 2020 and VESPA 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Hdt., 1.94.2; Pl., *Phdr*, 274 c-d. See WHITTAKER 2004, 296-297.

<sup>5</sup> Game-board models as ex-votos: PAYNE 1962, 131-132, nos. 1325-1328, pls. 39, 132-133. See also the clay dice and game pieces from the Acropolis of Athens: GRAEF – LANGLOTZ 1925, vol. I, 259-260. Stone game-boards (or abaci?) from the sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidauros: BLINKENBERG 1898, 1-23; SCHÄDLER 2009 a, 174, 181, 184; on their identification as abaci, see SCHÄRLIG 2001 and V. Dasen -J. Gavin in this volume.

ex-votos, offered by members of the community to a god or goddess, sometimes connected to rites of passage or other civic matters. Other examples come from funerary contexts in Greek sites, including clay game-board models of the mid-7th and early 6th century BC, from offering pits in the Kerameikos in Athens and Vari in Attica. Another clay game-board model was found in an archaic grave in the area of the ancient Attic demos of *Myrrhinous*, modern Markopoulo, and it is kept in the Archaeological Museum at Brauron (Vravrona).<sup>6</sup> Clay board-game models found in ancient graves and funerary offering pits, often with terracotta figures of mourners attached, have been interpreted as symbolic images of death, as an end to the game of life.<sup>7</sup> It has been suggested that, apart from the evident heroic and elite values, funerary symbolism is also present in attic black- or red-figure vase images of the doomed mythic warrior-heroes, Achilles and Ajax, playing a board game. This iconographic theme, found on more than 150 Attic vases, was popular in late archaic attic vase-painting, as well as in other art forms.<sup>8</sup> As a favourite pastime of the Greeks, the Egyptians and other Mediterranean people, board-games and toys, such as spinning tops (*strombos-oi*) and knucklebones (*astragals*), acquired uses and symbolisms for matters both of everyday life and death. Game pieces have been found in graves, such as in graves of the late 4th to early 3rd century BC in the region of the ancient city-state of Eretria, in Euboea Island.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Clay game-board models from ancient cemeteries: NAM 25665, (with mourners, of the mid-7th century BC, from the offering trench of a cremation burial in Vari). H. 18 cm, W. 18.3 cm, L. 24.8 cm., figurine height: 10 cm. KALLIPOLITIS 1963, 123-124, pls. 53-55; KALLIPOLITIS-FEYTMANS 1985, 35-38, figs. 5-8. The clay dice NAM 25664 (dimensions: 2.5 x 2.5 x 2.5cm) was found together with the game-board. KALLIPOLITIS 1963, 124, pls. 55 b-e; KALLIPOLITIS-FEYTMANS 1985, 38-40, figs. 10-11. Clay game-board model, also with mourners, from the Kerameikos (*“Opferplatz Ψ, Anlage LXXV, near the city walls”*), dated 580-570 BC: KÜBLER 1970, 512-514, pl. 102; WHITTAKER 2004, 279; BANOU – BOURNIAS 2014, 267. A clay game-board model, dated to the early 6th century BC, is housed in the National Museum in Copenhagen and another one in the Swiss Museum of Games: SCHÄDLER 2019, 98-99. On ancient clay game-board tables, see also CHIDIROGLOU – SCHÄDLER – SCHIERUP, in preparation. For information on the clay game-board model in Brauron Museum I thank Eleni Andrikou, Head of the Ephorate of Antiquities of East Attica, and the archaeologist Katerina Petrou.

<sup>7</sup> WHITTAKER 2004, 279-302.

<sup>8</sup> LIMCI (1981), s.v. Achilles, 96-103 (A. Kossatz-Deissmann); WHITTAKER 2004, 281; SCHÄDLER 2009b, 64-65, figs. 46-47.

<sup>9</sup> WHITTAKER 2004, 279-288. Child's grave from Eretria in the Louvre: KALTSAS *et alii* 2010, 329-335 (I. Hasselin Rous, C. Huguenot).

### 1. A unique terracotta scene of play

The terracotta figurine group NAM 4200 (Fig. 1; 1st century AD) is reported to have been found in Athens in 1855 during construction works in the area of the building of the royal palace. In 1836, three years after the creation of the modern Greek state at the end of the Greek War of Independence, a palace was constructed in Athens for Otto (1815-1867), second son of king Ludwig I of Bavaria, and Amalia (1818-1875), daughter of the Duke Paul Frederick Augustus of Oldenburg. At that time, Otto and Amalia had been appointed king and queen of the Greeks. The same and renovated building on modern *Syntagma - Constitution* Square today houses the Greek Parliament. Ground levelling and gardening works are attested for the years from 1849 to 1855 in the areas outside the palace and we can therefore surmise that the terracotta find was rather accidentally found, probably in a grave destroyed during work of this type. Recent excavations have shown that a large cemetery with graves of prehistoric to late Roman times covered the area in front of the Parliament building.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 1:** Terracotta group (H. 15 cm, max. W. 13.8 cm). Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. NAM 4200. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/ Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.R.E.D.). Photo Eleftherios Galanopoulos.

<sup>10</sup> ZACHARIADOU 2000, 148-161.

The terracotta figurine group NAM 4200 consists of three figures, two males and one female, occupied with a board-game of strategy.<sup>11</sup> The seated man and woman play the board-game, while a dwarf, with his face turned towards the man, stands and observes the game, as if ready to make comments. This figurine group recently came under renewed study on the grounds of its presentation in the exhibition galleries of the National Archaeological Museum, for a museum project in 2016, as well as for the purposes of the 21st Board Game Studies Colloquium in 2018. All the figures of the terracotta group wear long garments (*chiton* or Roman *tunica* for the man and Roman *stola* for the woman) and mantles (*himatia*). The woman wears a *himation* or *palla* over her head, with one of its ends hanging like a sash over her shoulder, a dress-type typical for Roman priestesses and women of elite status.<sup>12</sup> The two players are seated in wicker-type armchairs and have placed the game-board between them. The board is seen placed at a height that corresponds to chair arm-rests that are however not clearly denoted in clay. The game board (Fig. 2) is divided into  $6 \times 7$  squares. There are twelve counters (*pessoi*) in various places on the board, one of which is held in the woman's right hand. No dice are depicted. The game played by the figures has been identified with *Poleis*, or a related precursor to the Roman *ludus latrunculorum*.<sup>13</sup> The woman (Fig. 3) is represented with her hands stretched over the board, as if trying to explain some movement or the process of the game, while her male opponent sits seemingly relaxed. On the back of the chair of the male player figure the image of a flower or rosette (Fig. 4) has been impressed by the ancient terracotta artist or *coroplast*, while that of a long-necked bird, probably a goose (Fig. 5), was impressed and easily incised when the clay was still damp before baking, on the back of the chair of his opponent. Based on stylistic grounds, the terracotta group

<sup>11</sup> NAM 4200. WINTER 1903, II, 465, 4; LAFAYE 1904, 993, figs. 4366-4367; SCHÄDLER 1994, 51-53; SCHÄDLER 2007, 361 (the "Doctor's game"). For the find, see BURSIA 1855, 55-56; MICHAELIS 1863, 37-43, pl. 173; RICHTER 1887, 100-103, figs. 48-49. For a similar terracotta model of Roman times found in the Egyptian Fayoum see SCHÄDLER 2007, 361.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. GRANDJOUAN 1961, 78, no. 1019, pl. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Poll., *Onom.*, 9.98. See SCHÄDLER 1994, 47-67; SCHÄDLER 2001, 10-11; SCHÄDLER 2002, 91-102.



**Figure 2:** View of the game-board of the terracotta group NAM 4200. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/ Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.RE.D.). Photo Eleftherios Galanopoulos.



**Figure 3:** The female figure of the terracotta group NAM 4200. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/ Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.RE.D.). Photo Eleftherios Galanopoulos.



**Figure 4:** The impressed motif of a rosette on the back of the chair of the male player in the terracotta group NAM 4200. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/ Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.RE.D.). Photo Eleftherios Galanopoulos.



**Figure 5:** The impressed and incised motif of a bird, probably a goose, on the back of the chair of the female player in the terracotta group NAM 4200. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/ Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.RE.D.). Photo Eleftherios Galanopoulos.

is dated to the 1st century AD.<sup>14</sup> The dwarf's gaze and stance are probably meant to direct the viewer's eyes towards the central figure of the scene.

## 2. Dwarfs and match-making?

Dwarfs, and in general deformed or handicapped people, were often considered as belonging to a special class of entertainers or also to marginal social strata of the ancient Greek and Roman world. The presence of a dwarf in this terracotta group of players can be interpreted in a number of ways: he could be a family slave ready to serve his masters or a hired entertainer for some pantomime or theatrical act that may follow the game or a symposium. Dwarfs are mentioned by the sources as performers in elite banquets.<sup>15</sup> In the ancient world, dwarfism or other deformities were also sometimes seen as good luck figures, perhaps meant for one of the players of the terracotta group. Based on iconographic parallels in other materials, the dwarf could also be interpreted as a match maker for the pair of players. This hypothesis would lend an air of courtship to the game-players and transform the game into a love metaphor.<sup>16</sup> In all the above interpretations or other ones that can be suggested, the dwarf figure, with his close watch over the game, actually stands out as the observer or *narrator* of the story presented by the terracotta group. His presence would otherwise be easily

<sup>14</sup> For the Roman date of the group, see MICHAELIS 1863, 42. Some terracotta figurines of Roman Imperial times found in Athens and other regions share a number of stylistic traits with the terracotta group NAM 4200, such as the heavily built bodies and garment types of figures, as well as their schematically rendered facial features, cf. WINTER 1903, 465, 1-12; GRANDJOUAN 1961, 55, 59, nos. 416, 507, pls. 9, 11 (of the 1st to 2nd and probably of the 2nd century AD, correspondingly). In late Hellenistic to early Roman times, terracotta figurines of dwarfs were produced in a number of Greek cities, such as Athens, Smyrna and Myrina in Asia Minor, and they appear to have been popular, probably as apotropaic and magical objects, rather than sketches of pathological conditions, cf. for instance BESQUES 1971-1972, 169, no. D 1170, pl. 234 a.

<sup>15</sup> DASEN 2013 [1993], 230-236; DASEN 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Ov., *Ars am.* On the erotic metaphor of play, DASEN – MATHIEU 2021; SISSA 2021. Cf. also the scene of a love couple, a man and a woman, playing a board-game on a bronze mirror from Praeneste/Palestrina in the British Museum that also bears the inscription *opeinod devincam ted (opinor devincam te: "I think I have beaten you")*: SCHÄDLER 2009 a, 179, fig. 4.

dispensed with by the coroplast. He is there as part of the household and he relates (to) the story of the game.<sup>17</sup>

Terracotta figurines of board-game players are not very common. One additional example of Hellenistic or Roman times is in the Musée du Jouet in Moirans-en-Montagne (Fig. 6).<sup>18</sup> This figurine represents a male figure, seated at a tripod table with game board. Representations of board-game players are not numerous either. In the series of Roman funerary reliefs that



**Figure 6:** Terracotta figurine (H. 11 cm, W. 5 cm, Depth 4.5 cm) of a player seated at a tripod table with game board. © Moirans-en-Montagne, Musée du Jouet, inv. 2003.18.1118 (CAN-2330). Photo Museum.

<sup>17</sup> There is often a third person depicted in gaming scenes, see for instance the marble reliefs in Vienna and Turin and the Xenia mosaic from El-Djem: DÜTSCHKE 1880, nos. 23 and 31; SCHNEIDER 1905, pl. II.2.

<sup>18</sup> I thank Veronique Dasen and Mélanie Bessard for this information.

include ash urns, stelae and altars, a number depict a man and a woman playing together.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Playful inscriptions

We will briefly investigate the impressed signs on the back of the players' chairs and compare other similar and related finds in an attempt to illustrate their possible meaning or casual character. We will therefore attempt to investigate the following questions: are late Hellenistic and Roman inscriptions, impressed, or incised motifs on terracotta figurines meaningful, interpretative, or random? Were images of flowers and birds meaningful in terms of social context vocabulary and especially in matters of chance or game-playing?

Inscriptions on terracotta figurines, lamps and plastic vases are rather rare, but then they are almost always meaningful and sometimes playful, too. One large category of such inscriptions for terracotta figurines are coroplasts' signatures.<sup>20</sup> These are usually in the form of the personal name of the main coroplast or workshop owner, or a related abbreviation. Due to their pictorial character and their number, the two motifs of the terracotta group NAM 4200 cannot be placed into this category, in the sense that they cannot be seen as abbreviations of a coroplast's name or workshop. On the other hand, there is a large corpus of known graffiti, especially on vases or vase sherds, many of which are certainly meaningful and intended.<sup>21</sup> This type of inscriptional testimony is incised on the object, well after its manufacture phase, and therefore cannot be of the impressed type.

In order to better explore the terracotta group NAM 4200, we will seek examples of inscriptions and motifs that act as commentary to the figural representation or iconography of their object and were made during the

<sup>19</sup> DÜTSCHKE 1880, nos. 23 and 31; SCHNEIDER 1905, pl. II.2. For the series, see DASEN – MATHIEU 2021, fig. 6 (Turin), fig. 7 (Vienna), based on the ash urn of Margaris, freedwoman of Marcus Allius Herma, depicted playing latrunculi. The interpretation of the Palmyra relief in Boston, Museum of Fine Arts inv. no. 1970.346 is still debated. It could depict a distribution scene of tesserae for admission to a religious banquet, as ALBERTSON 2014 demonstrated, or a scene of play, as Heyn, forthcoming, suggests. On the ambiguities between board games, abaci and reckoning scenes, see also SCHÄRLIG 2001 and V. Dasen – J. Gavin in this volume.

<sup>20</sup> See for instance MOLLARD-BESQUES 1963, 201-219.

<sup>21</sup> Graffiti examples: LANG 1976, 6-7 (abecedaria), 8-11 (messages and lists), 11-15 (love and hate names), 23-51 (owners' marks), 55-81 (commercial notations), 94-95 (pictures, such as of caricatures and sexual abuse context).

process of manufacture. An example of a contextual inscription is offered by the terracotta lamp group NAM 12424 (Fig. 7; ca. 2nd century AD, based on inscription letter type) that consists of three actor or rather mime figures of a popular comedy titled *Hekyra* (*Mother in-Law*) by Terence, or an earlier version; the title of this comedy was purposefully inscribed on the back side of the terracotta lamp while the clay was still soft.<sup>22</sup> Another



**Figure 7:** Terracotta lamp group (H. 10 cm). Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. NAM 12424. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/ Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.R.E.D.). Photo Spelios Pistas.

<sup>22</sup> WINTER 1903, II, 429, 8; WATZINGER 1901, 1-8, with inscription: Μιμωλόγοι/ἡ ὑπόθ(ε)σις/ Εἰκυρ(ᾶ) and dating of the object in the late 3rd century BC; BIEBER 1920, fig. 142; BIEBER 1961, 107, fig. 415; HUNTER 2002, 198, fig. 30 (following WATZINGER 1901 as to the dating of the object). If the lamp is dated in the late 3rd century BC, the inscription cannot refer to Terence's *Hekyra* (165 BC), but to the homonymous predecessor play by Apollodoros of Karystos (floruit ca. 300-260 BC) or a similarly titled popular play or mime version. For Apollodoros of Karystos, see for instance: LESKI 1981, 919.

example is offered by the inscribed jug NAM 2069 of the Hellenistic period from Skyros Island (Fig. 8)<sup>23</sup> with its plastic representation of an old lady holding a *lagynos* or wine jar. The representation of an inebriated powerless old woman was a genre theme in Hellenistic sculpture and most probably



**Figure 8:** Clay plastic jug (H. 25 cm). Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. NAM 2069. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/ Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.R.E.D.). Photo NAM Photographic Archives.

<sup>23</sup> WEISHAUPL 1891, 143-152, pl. 10; WINTER 1903, II, 468, 8.

not unknown to people participating in public feasts in any ancient city. The inscription on the jug from Skyros is quite explicit: γραῦς ἦδε οἶνοφόρος κεχαρημέ(νη ὦδ)ε κάθηται (“This old lady, full of wine, joyfully seats here”), a pun on the shape and the content of the vessel.<sup>24</sup> A fragmentary terracotta mould from the Athenian Agora dated some time before 267 AD is another example. It bears the representation of a draped woman wearing a mask that reclines on a couch, supported on her left elbow. Her right hand lies across her body holding a wreath. A man sits at the foot of the couch wearing a mask. He holds a wreath in his left hand and supports his chin on the other. On the space beneath the couch, there is on the mould the inscription *Comedia Pylades*, that helps us better identify the scene as pertaining to comedy and theatre performance.<sup>25</sup>

A clay relief lamp (Fig. 9)<sup>26</sup> from Egypt of Roman Imperial times in the Benaki Collection of the National Archaeological Museum in Athens has the form of a small boat; the word *Nike* (Victory) is inscribed on its underside as a good wish for its owner. A composite clay lamp of the Roman period in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston bears a terracotta male figure, in *chlamys*, with an open scroll on his knees. Letters have been impressed on the scroll by the lamp-maker, which (albeit meaningless in their line groupings), help us to identify the figure as that of a scribe or literate man.<sup>27</sup>

Simple linear shapes inscribed or painted on terracotta figurines can be also meaningful. In the context of board-games, two terracotta groups, one in the Louvre and one in the British Museum, represent figures employed in the *omilla* game. The board of the game is impressed on the base of the complex, divided in unequal parts, probably intentionally than otherwise.<sup>28</sup> There are also incised, impressed or painted motifs on terracotta figurines and other objects, such as game pieces, that are more difficult to interpret

<sup>24</sup> IG XII.8, 679. For the sculptural type of the old drunken woman, see for instance RIDGWAY 1990, 337-338, pl. 174.

<sup>25</sup> GRANDJOUAN 1961, 58, no. 502, pl. 11, fig. 4; SIFAKIS 1966, 268-273.

<sup>26</sup> NAM Benaki Collection 1138. On its underside, the inscription ΝΕΙΚΗ (Νίκη). On the inside surface of the high handle, a standing god with scepter, probably Serapis, in relief. A snake on either side of the god, on the edge of the disc. Unpublished.

<sup>27</sup> Boston, Museum of Fine Arts inv. no. RES.08.35b. Acquired by the Museum as a gift by Edward Perry Warren in 1908. The head of the figure is missing. <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/277551>.

<sup>28</sup> For the terracotta group in Paris, Louvre CA 1734, see CARÈ 2019, 92-93, fig. 1. For the *omilla* game, see Suet., *On Greek Games*, 1, 103 ed. J. Taillardat; Poll., *Onom.*, 9, 102; Suda, *Lex.*, ω 92.

or investigate. One example is offered by the archaic clay die with the painted image of a male head that has been interpreted as a representation of *Palamedes*, inventor of dice games (Fig. 10; ca. 665-640 BC)<sup>29</sup>. A number of clay dice from the Athenian Acropolis in the National Archaeological Museum bear painted floral and linear motifs, perhaps pertaining to dice throws or purely decorative, if multiple.<sup>30</sup>



**Figure 9:** Clay relief lamp (H. 3.5 cm, L. 8 cm, W. 4.6 cm), in the form of a small boat. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. NAM Benaki Collection 1138. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/ Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.R.E.D.). Photo NAM Photographic Archives.

<sup>29</sup> NAM 19366: Attributed to the Ram Jug Painter. PAPASPYRIDIS-KAROZOU 1973, 55-65; MORRIS 1984, 89; SCHEFOLD 1993, 136-137, fig. 134; XAGORARI 1996, 13; ROCCO 2008, 144, 151, 255, no. BAr 14.

<sup>30</sup> On clay dice, see also D. Paleothodoros in this volume.

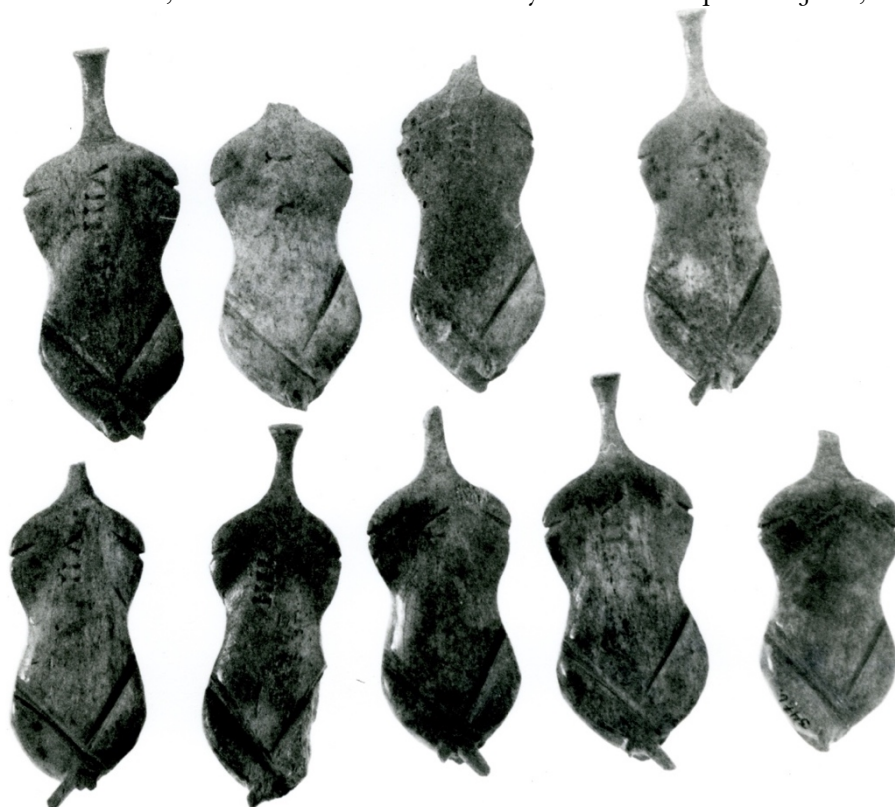


**Figure 10:** Clay die (4.2 x 4 x 4.5 cm), with painted representation of a male head. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. NAM 19366. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.R.E.D.). Photo NAM Photographic Archives.

#### 4. Ludic birds and flowers

Let us now examine whether an image of a flower and that of a long-necked bird, probably a goose, can be meaningful in terms of social context vocabulary and especially in matters of chance or game-playing. A number of small objects in the form of feathers from plucked geese, found in Athens,

Pompeii and other sites, especially the ones with Latin numbers inscribed on them, have been interpreted as gaming pieces. They are made from various materials, such as ivory, and based on their context data, have been dated to Roman times.<sup>31</sup> One example is offered by the contents of a grave of the 1st century AD excavated at the site of the main building of the National Bank in Athens in 1865. Game items were deposited in this grave, in particular such as eleven natural knucklebones and nine ivory objects in the form of feathers from plucked geese (Fig. 11), interpreted as counters since they bear Latin numbers (I, III, VI, VII, VIII, VIII, X, XI and XII) inscribed on them. The grave, that most probably belonged to a woman of the elite class, also contained two ivory animal-shaped objects, two



**Figure 11:** Nine ivory counters (Max. h. 5.9 cm, max. w. 2.4 cm, max. thickness: 0.09 cm). Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. NAM Chr 347 b. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/ Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.R.E.D.).

<sup>31</sup> LAMER 1927, 2015, § 58; ZERVOUDAKI 2007-2008, 232-233, no. 18, fig. 12 (NAM Chr 347 b); LAMBRUGO 2015, 87, nos. 6, 7, figs. 3, 4.

perforated crystal nuts, two crystal (*eikosaedron*) prisms and luxury items, such as gold rings and bracelets, gold leaves, two silver mirrors, a glass *pyxis* with decoration in relief and an ivory plaque with a relief representation of a Maenad.<sup>32</sup> The existence of feather-type counters, such as those found in Athens and Pompeii, with inscribed numbers, indicates that some countable game elements or perhaps the counting of losses and winnings in games of Roman times could metaphorically refer to the plucking of feathers from a bird.

The bird depicted in the terracotta group NAM 4200 is very schematically drawn. We can however see its half-open wings that give us the impression of some movement. Since the terracotta group probably came from a funerary context, as opposed, for example, to a sacred deposit, it is difficult to interpret the bird as a symbol of a goddess or her attribute. Geese were connected to Athena and Aphrodite in Greece and Hera in Rome.<sup>33</sup> If we choose to adhere to a cultic significance for the bird image impressed on our terracotta group, we are then led to wonder why a simple terracotta figurine of a bird, or any number of such easily made terracotta figurines occasionally found in graves in Greece dated from Classical to Roman times, could not have served the funerary ritual and purpose with less trouble and much faster. Even if we cannot exclude an interpretation of the bird image as a symbol of femininity based on its cultic connections to Aphrodite and Hera, one wonders what relation(s) this symbolic image might have had to the game scene of our terracotta group.

In game vocabulary on the other hand, as well as in relative iconographic examples, such as the one presented by our terracotta group NAM 4200 itself, one can suggest a number of possible interpretations for an image of a bird. The image could be seen as casual, meaningless or jocular. These interpretations would however best suit declarations in the form of graffiti and not accord well with the category of impressed and purposeful manufacture signs. In symbolic game language, an interpretation of the image of the bird on the terracotta group NAM 4200 as a victim of exploitation, as a plucked bird, is not impossible. The act of

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<sup>32</sup> ZERVOUDAKI 2007-2008, 219-246. For the prisms, see PLATZ-HORSTER 2017, 107-185.

<sup>33</sup> Geese in association with Athena and Aphrodite in Classical Athens and with Hera in Rome: Ov., *Met.*, 8.684-685; VILLING 2008, 171-180. Geese were also sacred to Osiris and Isis; see Paus. 10.32.16; THOMPSON 1868, 193-195.

plucking feathers from a live being (or metaphorically gaining counters from an opponent) seems appropriate for the rivalry shown in the terracotta group, at least till proven otherwise by other, new or unknown, inscribed examples. The concept of plucking feathers from a domestic bird cannot mean anything but bad luck and defeat for the victim.<sup>34</sup> Aristophanes uses the plucking of bird-feathers as a metaphor for embarrassment and defeat and later comic poets, as well as other sources, refer to whole geese or edible delicacies from these birds served at luxurious *symposia*.<sup>35</sup> Pliny informs us that an income can be made from the sales of white-goose feathers and that these birds were plucked twice a year in some regions.<sup>36</sup> In our eyes, plucking feathers from a live bird or skinning a live animal is an appallingly inhumane act, yet one myth concerning the satyr Marsyas refers to this procedure as the agreed punishment for the loser in the musical competition between him and Apollo.<sup>37</sup> In all periods, the act of declaring a victory and proclaiming dominance over a defeated opponent can take various forms.

Flowers and vegetation symbols have also been connected to symbolic language and floral motifs are not unknown in assemblages of game items. Wishes for one's good luck or the clumsiness of the opponent could be made explicit in game playing by inscriptions on counters. Counters, *tesserae* and other game pieces, some inscribed with words pertaining to victory or clumsiness are known from many sites.<sup>38</sup> A number of inscribed Roman

<sup>34</sup> Domestic geese: Od., 19.536-537; Pl., *Plt.*, 264 c; Kratinus, frg. 49 [Ath., *Deipn.*, 384 c]. See also DALBY 2000, 109-110. The marrow or delicate inner part of geese (*anseris medullula*) is mentioned by Catull., 25, cf. Priap. 64.1. Sacred Roman geese gave warning of the approach of foe and saved the Capitol during the First Sack of Rome in 390 BC: Ov., *Met.*, 8.684-685; Livy, 5.47; Plut., *Camillus*, 27; Lucr. 4.673. Geese were plucked while live, for effective preservation of their feather hues: Punch, a 19th century issue, The Guardian, 14.01.2016.

<sup>35</sup> Ar., *Av.*, 284-286, 520-521; Eub., frg., 110; Hor., *Sat.*, 2.8.88; Ath., *Deipn.*, 3.126e. See also DALBY 2000, 109-110, 388, n. 37; WILKINS – HILL 2006, 43. Geese were also served in priestly meals in Egypt: Hdt., 2.37.4.

<sup>36</sup> Plin., *HN*, 10.27.

<sup>37</sup> Pl., *Euthyd.*, 285d; Diod. Sic., 3.59; Paus., 2.22.9; Ov., *Met.* 6.382 ff.; Apollod., *Bibl.*, 1.4. For the Mantinea reliefs that depict the contest of Apollo and Marsyas, in the company of Muses, see for instance KAROUZOU 1974 [1968], 167-168; CORSO 1988, 141, 164-169; STEWART 1990, 277-279, figs. 492-494; RIDGWAY 1997, 206-209.

<sup>38</sup> For rectangular tesserae inscribed with Latin numbers and words, such as *Fortunat*, see CECCHINI 2015, 67-70.

game pieces are housed in the British Museum in London.<sup>39</sup> Examples of round clay counters in flower-form come from Corinth. One counter was made from the central part of a relief bowl underside, which was decorated with a rosette, and belongs to the Hellenistic period. A couple of late Roman or Byzantine counters from the same city are made of bone cut in rosette form, a shape common in this period.<sup>40</sup>

Aphrodite, among all Olympian goddesses, was the one most associated with roses<sup>41</sup> and lucky charms. According to the lyric poet Anacreon, the white rose first sprang forth during the birth of Aphrodite.<sup>42</sup> The myth of the tragic death of Adonis, Aphrodite's mortal lover, with the goddess's grief over it, also involves a rose, anemones and other flowers.<sup>43</sup> In ancient Greek art, Aphrodite and Eros are often depicted in association with gardens and flowers. In Classical Athens, Aphrodite was worshipped at a sanctuary in the Gardens, an area probably located to the southeast of the Acropolis, near the river Ilissos. A famous statue of the goddess by the sculptor Alkamenes graced this sanctuary.<sup>44</sup> Another sanctuary of the goddess was on the north slope of the Acropolis.<sup>45</sup> In Roman times, Venus-Aphrodite was considered as protector of the gardens in Pompeii. In Classical and Hellenistic Greece, Aphrodite *Pandemos* was also connected to symbolic representations of stars.<sup>46</sup>

In Greek and Roman antiquity, Aphrodite was connected to the best game luck and her name was given to the highest throw of knucklebones. *Golden Aphrodite* was an eponym of the goddess attested by the ancient sources and it probably came to represent a household name among board-game players for a very good throw of the dice.<sup>47</sup> The worst throw was on the

<sup>39</sup> JENKINS 1990, 30-37, fig. 36 (one illustrated object is Minoan, most of the other game pieces are of the 1st – 2nd century AD).

<sup>40</sup> DAVIDSON 1952, 220-221, nos. 1704, 1705, 1730, pl. 99.

<sup>41</sup> KINSLEY 1989, 189-190.

<sup>42</sup> Anac. Εἰς τὸ ῥόδον.

<sup>43</sup> Bion, *Adonis' Epitaphius*, 10-11, 65, 75-76.

<sup>44</sup> Paus., 1.19.2. See for instance GOETTE 2001, 101-102; HAVELOCK 2007 [1995], 109; ROSENZWEIG 2007 [2004], 29-44; SALTA 2015, 317.

<sup>45</sup> See for instance BRONEER 1960, 54-67; BURKERT 1993, 473; DALLY 1997, 1-20; GOETTE 2001, 41-42, 54.

<sup>46</sup> Cult of Aphrodite: BURKERT 1993, 324-331, 374-375. Aphrodite and stars: KNIGGE 1982, 153-170.

<sup>47</sup> Χρυσή, πολύχρυσος Ἀφροδίτη: Il. 5, 427; Hes. [Sc.] 1; Hes., Theog. 822; Diod. Sic., 1.97. Cf. Aesch., Supp. 555. See PAULY'S RE, 2732, 2748, 2763-2765 (F. Dümmler). The

other hand associated with the dog.<sup>48</sup> To sum up, roses or stars have in all times been considered lucky charms and Aphrodite was often represented in connection to these motifs. A clay flower of the Hellenistic period with a relief representation of Aphrodite, from Attica, in the Louvre Museum, and another one of the 2nd century BC, with a child Eros figure, from Crete, in the National Archaeological Museum (Fig. 12), may serve as examples.<sup>49</sup>



**Figure 12:** Clay flower (Diam. 27 cm). Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. NAM 6063. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/ Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.RE.D.). Photo Irini Miari.

luckiest throw of the dice was also called Midas, after the very wealthy king of the Phrygians: Tyrt., 12.6; Eub., frg. 58; Luc., *Merc. Cond.*, 20.

<sup>48</sup> Poll., *Onom.*, 9, 100 (as with knucklebones); Prop., 4, 8, 46; Ov., *Tr.*, 2, 474; Suet., *Aug.*, 71; cf. Isid., *Orig.*, 18, 65.

<sup>49</sup> Louvre: BESQUES 1971-1972, 6, no. D 20, pl. 6 b (2nd to 1st century BC). NAM 6063: PAPA 2014, 209-220.

If we accept the claim that the images of a bird and a flower of our terracotta group NAM 4200 are not casual or random, can we trace one metaphor that would combine both images in a game context? We revise some general data on the images: Plants, such as roses, and fowl birds, such as geese, were and still are obviously familiar sights to people living in rural areas in the Mediterranean and other parts of the world.<sup>50</sup> Agriculture and animal husbandry were parts of everyday life from ancient to pre-modern times. Flowers have almost always won people's admiration and are often connected to celebratory or memorable events. Geese, as fat domesticated birds, seem to have been connected to metaphors of exploitation from ancient to pre-modern times. Bird feathers and especially the ones from geese were used till pre-modern times for filling up pillows and mattresses and represented an economic resource that was widely exploited. The household chore of feather-plucking from live geese has been a subject of pre-modern paintings of village life.<sup>51</sup> Even the word goose was used as a rather friendly but still pejorative term in English literature of the Renaissance, as well as of the Victorian period. A board-game named *Goose* was also played in England around 1700. This game has been known since the 16th century and comes from Italy.<sup>52</sup>

### Conclusion

Based on these different hypotheses, we suggest the following interpretations of the terracotta figurine group NAM 4200: the woman is probably represented protesting because the man has successfully captured her pawns that are hidden beneath her hand and arm and which she apparently does not want to submit. This capture probably leads to the man's swift victory by a clever move. Another possible interpretation of the scene is that the female figure with outstretched hands is meant to admonish her competitor to wait for her to catch up with him, rather unexpectedly,

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<sup>50</sup> See, for instance, the comedy scene with fat birds (geese) attacking cooks on the Corinthian red-figure calyx krater NAM 1391, from Boeotia, dated in 380-370 BC: AVRONIDAKI 2007, 30. For images of rural life on vases, see MALAGARDIS 1988, 95-134.

<sup>51</sup> The paintings by M. Liebermann, *Women plucking geese* (oil on canvas), 1871, in Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie, and by A. Ancher, *Plucking the geese* (oil on canvas), 1904, in the National Gallery of Denmark may serve as examples.

<sup>52</sup> Goose as a pejorative or playful term, cf. for instance W. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 2.2.90, *King Henry IV*, 3.1.230-233. For the goose game, see for instance a game-board print dated ca. 1700 in S. Pepys Library in Magdalene College in Cambridge.

thanks to a clever move she is about to make at the last minute. A number of Roman representations of two board-game players can serve as parallels: one of the players is depicted protesting and crying out *mora* (“wait”), as the Latin inscription on one of these artefacts testifies, as well as *tesserae* with the inscription *moraris*.<sup>53</sup> In either case, the female figure of the terracotta group NAM 4200 is shown in an awkward, if not losing, position. On the other hand, the male figure of the terracotta group has drawn himself away from the game-board as if satisfied with the result of his actions.

The game played involves counters, position moves, and strategic thinking and has therefore been identified with *Poleis*, as previous publications have shown. *Poleis* is the only game of this type that we know from ancient Greece. The game depicted in our terracotta group is certainly a board-game of strategy and the competitive player figures have been thought worthy of playful comment by the ancient terracotta artist or *coroplast*. The motifs, the bird and the flower, on the back of the playing figures can be seen as intentional and not random. They were impressed by the *coroplast* while the clay was still soft, as were the shallow lines of the game-board, and they were obviously not incised sometime after the manufacture of the terracotta group had been completed. The seated male figure can probably be identified as the winner of the game, implied as such by his aloof stance, his lack of gesturing and the flower (rosette) the ancient *coroplast* impressed on the back of his seat. The female figure may be identified as the (final or momentous) loser of the game by her vivid gesturing, her hiding of pawns, as well as the impressed and easily incised image of a long-necked, feathery bird, probably a goose, on the backside of her seat. The dwarf turns his admiring gaze upon the winner’s face and not otherwise. The maker of the early Roman terracotta figurine group NAM 4200 must have certainly pondered on the outcome of the game depicted in his artefact. Winning or losing a game, a case, a discussion argument, a chance to accomplish a plan or grasp a life-time opportunity was and still is a stimulating conversation topic in social life and communication networks. A random symbol inscribed on the back of a terracotta figurine could, in all probability, be interpreted as a playful comment from the *coroplast*, attempted in the spree of the moment before placing this and other of his ceramic products in the kiln. It is the juxtaposition of the two motifs, the bird and the rose, and their

<sup>53</sup> CECCHINI 2015, 67; ROWAN 2019, 84-85.

symbolic connotations, that lead to our tentative claim of a meaningful commendation on the outcome of the game, regarding the identification of its winner and loser. Since our terracotta group was probably found in a grave, a funerary interpretation of the scene could be also considered. The symbolism of life as a board-game was one familiar to the Romans, as literary sources and finds indicate.<sup>54</sup> One may as well cautiously add the well-known argument that a male person winning a game over a female one also accords with our views of a male-dominated world throughout ancient times. On the other hand, if we interpret the dwarf as a match maker, the whole game can be allegorically taken to symbolize a love affair between the two players, a bond the loss of which is lamented upon in a funerary context and adequately symbolized both by the bird and the flower. In any case, there is no reason to doubt that the game depicted on the terracotta group, as well as other board games of strategy or luck, were popular in large parts of the population in a big city such as Roman Athens or elsewhere. As this and other related finds suggest, in early Roman Athens, elite society members chose complicated and intellectual ways of spending their free time, and apparently, members of the craftsmen's milieu were able to follow up on gaming situations and attitudes and made grave goods that reflected on a popular pastime.

## Abbreviations

*DAGR* Daremberg C.V. – Saglio E. *Dictionnaire des Antiquités grecques et romaines*, Paris, 1877-1919.

*IG XII.8* Friedrich C. *Inscriptiones Graecae XII.8. Inscriptiones insularum maris Thracici, Lemnos, Imbros, Samothrace, Thasos, Skiathos (etc.) and Skyros*, Berlin, 1909.

*RE* Pauly A. – Wissowa G. – Kroll W. (eds), *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Stuttgart, 1893–1980.

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<sup>54</sup> WHITTAKER 2004, 297-299. See also DASEN – MATHIEU 2021 and U. Schädler in this volume.

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