

4 Mehen

The Ancient Egyptian Game of the Serpent Timothy Kendall

The study of ancient Egyptian board games inevitably begins in the tomb of Hesy-Re at North Saqqara. This famous tomb, excavated in 1911 by Quibell,¹ belonged to a high official of King Djoser of the Third Dynasty and presages in its size and decorative embellishments the great nobles' tombs of the Old Kingdom. Conceived as a house or storehouse for eternity, it was intended to contain not only the owner's real material possessions, but also precise facsimile paintings of a complete array of contemporary necessities, all of which were believed to serve the deceased, in his life after death, as magical substitutes for the real things in the event that the latter should be lost. While whatever real objects deposited in the tomb were entirely plundered, some of the paintings fortunately survived. Executed with the precision of a technical draughtsman, they illustrate a wide variety of household furnishings of the time, including the boards and complete sets of pieces for three board games, which are shown resting on a *trompe l'oeil* reed mat. In view of Hesy-Re's evident desire to have a fully provisioned tomb, it may be assumed that these three games formed the essential repertory of all such amusements of his day, about 2700 BC (Fig. 4.1).²

Although many pieces or parts of these same three games have been recovered from Egyptian tombs of Early Dynastic times, intact sets from this period are unknown, which is why this painting is such an important document: it allows us to understand what comprised complete sets of the games that were presumably the earliest indigenous sedentary entertainments of this type in the Nile Valley.

As the concepts governing tomb furnishings evolved, we find that in time not only were real goods and pictures of the same objects provided for the tomb, but also comprehensive written lists of things. Just as careful painted images were believed to assume reality for the deceased after burial, so

too were written names of things believed to provide by magic the very commodities they describe. Thus by the early Fourth Dynasty, perhaps not more than a century after Hesy-Re, the tomb of Prince Rahotep at Meidum contained an elaborate offering list bearing the names of many of the same objects depicted in the earlier tomb, including the names of the same three board games.³ In each case the spelling of the name of the game is followed by a carefully executed picture of its board so that there can be no mistaking its identity.

At the top of Hesy-Re's tableau appears a game that was played on a rectangular board of thirty squares, the surface of which is marked off into three rows of ten. Beside it is an ebony box of playing pieces for the two opponents. Between the pieces is a set of four elongated rods, which can be recognized as a set of two-sided dice sticks of a type still in use in the Nile Valley.⁴ From Rahotep's offering list and other references, we know this game was called *zn.t* (*senet*) or 'to pass', or simply 'passing'.⁵ Of the three games pictured, it is by far the best known and can be followed in the archaeological record almost uninterrupted throughout pharaonic history.⁶

At the bottom of the painting is another game also played on a rectangular board. Here the playing surface has been divided into sixteen spaces separated by sixteen thin lines, which probably represented raised wooden dividing bars or cut notches on the board surface. A box to the left contains the playing pieces, again, for only two players. Its name, provided by Rahotep's offering list, was *mn* (*men*), which is probably to be translated 'endurance'.⁷ The least known of the three games, it appears only with extreme rarity in very early archaeological contexts and disappears from the record altogether after its occurrence in Rahotep's list.⁸ There are good reasons, however, for suspecting that during the Old

1 Quibell 1913.

2 Quibell 1913: 18–21, pl. XI; Emery 1961: 248–51.

3 Petrie 1892: pl. XIII.

4 Discussed in Kendall 1982: 271–2; see especially Lane 1871: 49–53.

5 Erman/Grapow 1929: 453–455.

6 See the paper by P. Piccione in the present volume.

7 Erman/Grapow 1929: 60.

8 Two examples of the *men* game were found in one of the A-Group Nubian 'royal tombs' at Qustul (Williams 1986: 130–1, pls 66–7). Both were of limestone. The complete example was marked by sixteen transverse grooves. The other, preserved only in an end fragment, bore holes at the corners indicating that it had been elevated on small legs. These were accompanied by rectangular ivory plaques, probably the counters. These seem to be identical to the pieces shown in Hesy-Re's painting. A similar game was found in Saqqara Tomb 3504 (in Subsidiary Grave 16), where it lay beside a skeleton, the board on one side and the pieces on the other in a tight cluster, as if they had originally been contained within a leather bag (Emery 1954: 29, 31, fig. 11). The board was a long rectangular wooden panel marked off by means of raised wooden

strips into two parallel rows of thirteen squares. With it were two groups of thirteen ivory dome-shaped pieces. In storerooms of the same tomb a slate game board of the same type was also found, marked by incised lines into eleven bar-like spaces (Emery 1954: 66 no. 262, pl. xxx). Obviously the game was intended for no more than two players. Neither the number of pieces allotted to the players nor the number of places on the boards seems to have had any effect on the play of the game, except to make it longer or shorter. The form of the board suggests a simple race game in which the players tried to carry their respective pieces from one end to the other before their opponent did so. Although no dice sticks were found with the set in Tomb 3504-16, nor were represented with Hesy-Re's set, they were found with the games at Qustul; it thus seems likely that the moves were effected by throws of such implements or something comparable. Although *men* disappears after the early Fourth Dynasty, it seems so similar in concept to the later race game of 'Pegs and Holes'/'Fifty-Eight Holes' that the latter would seem to be its direct descendant, changed only in the style of its board and pieces. For that game, see the contribution by A. J. Hoerth in this volume.

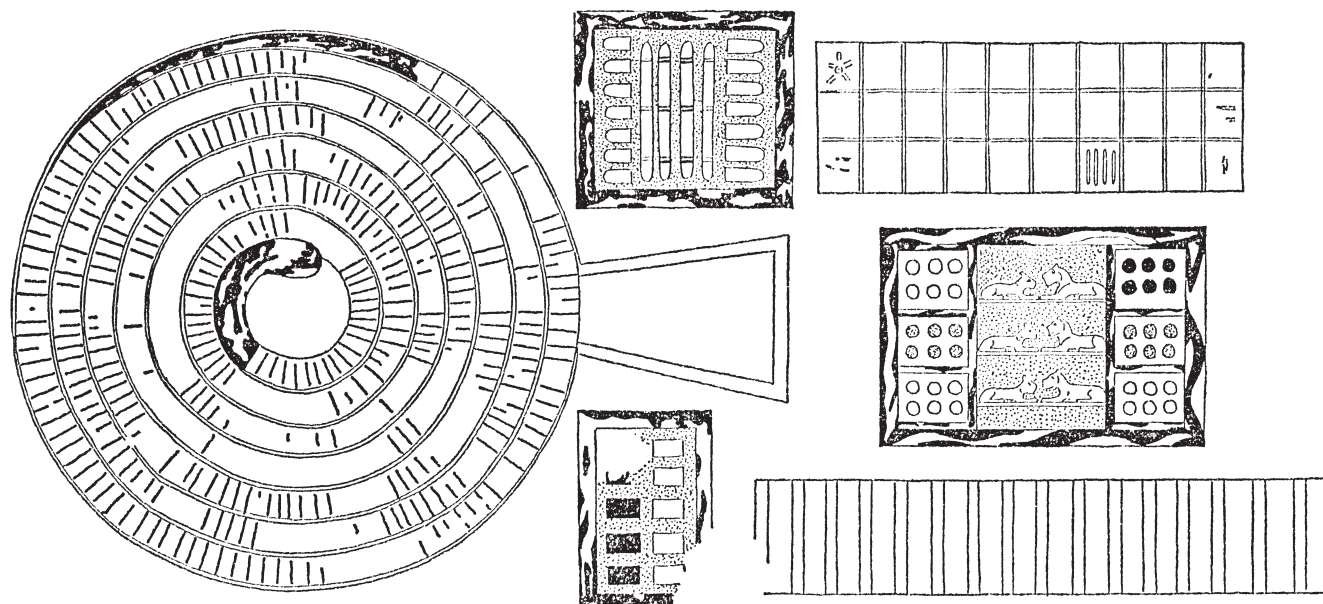


Fig. 4.1 The board games painted in the tomb of Hesy-Re, Dynasty 3, about 2700 BC; after Emery 1961: p. 251, fig. 150.

Kingdom it metamorphosed into the well-attested game known commonly as 'Pegs and Holes', which appeared in the early Middle Kingdom (See Chap. ?)

The game shown between these two was played on a large round board with a trapezoidal projection. Here the playing surface takes the form of a coiled snake, its tail on the outside and its head in the middle. The head and tail sections were painted black with yellow lines, while the serpent's tightly-wound body was painted yellow and was marked off by equally spaced red lines, which evidently formed the track for the pieces. The number of spaces, now no longer clear, seems to have been in excess of four hundred. The pieces appear within an ebony box to the right, which is divided into six small compartments, each containing six marbles of different colours, suggesting that as many as six could play the game. In the centre section of the box are six special lion-shaped pieces – actually three lions and three lionesses. No dice appear with this or the *men* game, but perhaps we are to understand that the stick dice stored with the *senet* game were to be used for all three. The reasons for suggesting this will become clear below.

The name of this game, as we learn from Rahotep's offering list and from other subsequent illustrations, was *mhn* (*mehen*), which means 'to coil' or, as a noun, the 'Coiled One'.⁹ Of the three games, it has perhaps the most enigmatic history. It is this game that forms the subject of the present paper.¹⁰

No *mehen* pieces have yet been excavated with a board, but large numbers of stray pieces for the game are known from funerary contexts dating from the late Predynastic Period to the end of the Second Dynasty.¹¹ Hesy-Re's painting suggests that a common set of pieces consisted of 36 marbles divided into six groups or 'teams,' and six lions (Fig. 4.2). Some outstanding finds suggest that this was a recognized

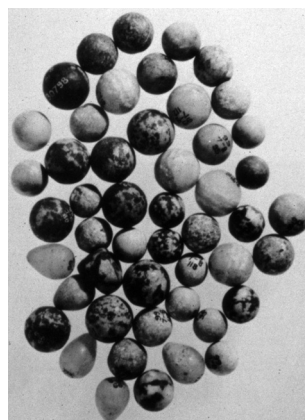


Fig. 4.2a Ivory 'marbles' for Mehen. British Museum...???



Fig. 4.2b Ivory lion for Mehen. British Museum...??????



Fig. 4.2c Ivory lion for Mehen. Ägyptisches Museum, Berlin. 18607.

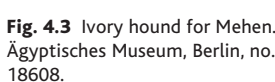


Fig. 4.3 Ivory hound for Mehen. Ägyptisches Museum, Berlin, no. 18608.



standard. A tomb of the First Dynasty from Abu Roash, for example, contained an identical set of three ivory lions and three collared ivory lionesses, together with an unspecified number of red and white marbles.¹² An almost identical set was reported from Abydos with a number of white marbles, while yet another from Saqqara included a set of six ivory lions, several dice sticks, and 39 marbles.¹³ Sometimes the form of the pieces varied. It seems that figures of hounds were commonly substituted for lions, and at Abusir, a complete set of six hounds was recovered (Fig. 4.3).¹⁴ A unique fragmentary *mehen* set from the A-Group of royal

9 Erman/Grapow 1929: 128; Montet 1925: 372–5.

10 For previous discussions of *mehen*, see Ranke 1940: 66–68; Montet 1955: 189–97; Vandier 1964: 486–93; Shore 1963: 88–91; Swiny 1980: 54–78; see also references in n. 11 here, and most recently, Piccione 1990: 43–52.

11 From Abu Roash: Montet 1946: 186–9; Saleh/Sourouzzian 1987: no. 12. From Abusir el-Meleq: Scharff 1926: 63 pl. 39. From Abydos: Amélineau 1899: pl. xxxi; Petrie 1901: 23, pl. vi, 3–4;

Petrie 1925: 6–7, pl. vii.

From Ballas: Petrie and Quibell 1896: 14, pl. vii; 35.

From Elephantine: Kaiser et al., 1976: 86, pl. 25d.

From Gebelein: Capart 1905: 178, fig. 140; Petrie 1920: 11, pl. viii, 25–28, pl. ix; 23; Schweitzer 1948: 12, pl. 1.

From Helwan: Saad 1969: 45, pl. 49.

From Naqada: de Morgan 1896–97: 192–4; Capart 1905: 179, 140.

12 Montet 1946: 186–8, pl. 7; Saleh/Sourouzzian 1987: no. 12.

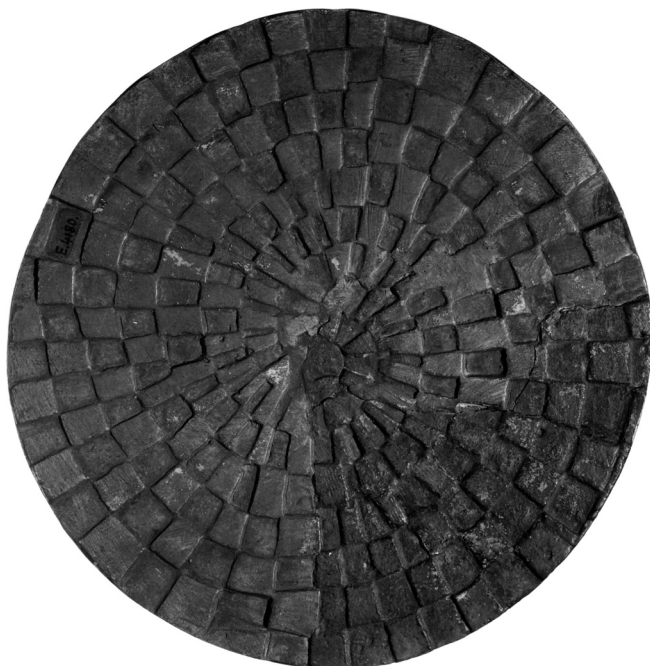


Fig. 4.4 Mehen board from the tomb of Peribsen, Abydos, Dynasty 2. Brussels, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, E. 4180.

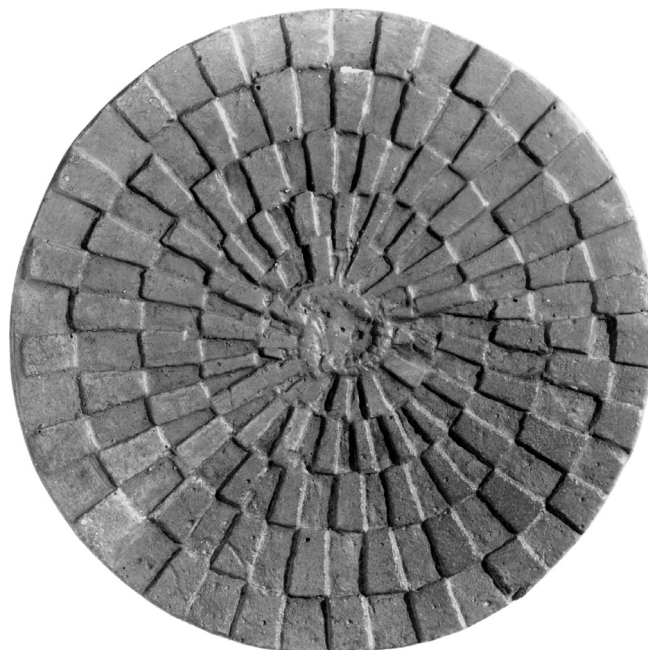


Fig. 4.5 Mehen board from the tomb of Peribsen, Abydos, Dynasty 2. Morlanweltz, Belgium, Musée Royal de Mariemont, B. 102.0

tombs at Qustul in Lower Nubia seems to have used miniature hippopotami.¹⁵

Normally such sets have been found in individual graves, but in the late Predynastic cemetery at Ballas, a quantity of gaming pieces, some at least seemingly designed for mehen, was found buried in a pit in the centre of a large cluster of graves, as if intended to be shared by all those interred in its vicinity. The pit contained four ivory lions of familiar type, a single piece in the form of a hare, sixteen four-sided prisms made in differently-coloured pairs, and eighteen ivory dice sticks.¹⁶

The lion pieces in Hesy-Re's painting are white, suggesting they were ivory, and indeed the great majority of known pieces of this type are indeed of carved ivory. One known ivory piece has eyes inlaid in chalcedony; others are of terracotta, limestone, alabaster, breccia, serpentine, and even rock crystal. The 'marbles' too are made from an equally wide variety of materials and coloured stones.¹⁷

The fact that no board has yet been found with its pieces suggests perhaps that most of the originals were made of wood and did not survive, having either been destroyed by rot or by wood-eating insects. The fourteen known surviving boards are of carved stone, faience or ivory. Unfortunately, of these, only five have a known archaeological provenance. While the authenticity of particular examples may be questioned, the distinct stylistic groups into which they all fall and the design similarities which they share do ring true, giving us reason to believe that they are all genuine and simply belong to different periods of possibly different regional traditions.

Four mehen boards were found at Abydos by Amélineau in the tomb of Peribsen, fourth king of Second Dynasty.¹⁸ These were all flat, round slabs of glazed sandstone, carved with tracks of slots or squared cups designed to contain the marble counters. They appear to have been deliberately broken. Only three could be completely reassembled, while a fourth survived only in a single fragment. As a group they have a distinctly unrefined appearance and their surfaces do not even suggest coiled serpents. Furthermore, the form of the playing surface on each differs from one board to another, and they all differ somewhat from all the other known examples, even Hesy-Re's. This perhaps indicates that the game in the late Second Dynasty was still unstandardized and evolving.

One of the Abydos boards has a playing surface consisting of seven concentric rings of slots, which neither spiral nor lead to the centre.¹⁹ It is thus unclear just how the pieces moved from one to another – if indeed that was the object – unless certain slots were once specially marked, allowing pieces to jump to the next inside or outside row.

Another board, now in Brussels, has not one but four parallel spiralling tracks, each with 33 holes, suggesting that here players moved their pieces on separate paths, perhaps in a kind of race (Fig. 4.4).²⁰

The third complete board, now in Mariemont, has five concentric rings of slots, much like the first, but close examination reveals that one slot in each ring merges slightly with and gives access to the next inner ring, thus producing a true single spiralling track of 90 slots from the 'head' to the tail (Fig. 4.5).²¹ Unlike the others, the centre of this board is ringed by a raised coil, carved with scales, suggesting a snake's body.

13 Petrie 1925: 6–7, pl. vii; Emery 1954: 58, 233, fig. 66, pl. xxix.

14 Scharff 1926: 63, pl. 39, nos. 437–8; see also Montet 1946: 190; Petrie 1901: 24, no 9, pl. xxxiv, 22, pl. vi a, 8; Petrie 1902: 24, no. 22, pl. iii; de Morgan 1896–97: 192; Capart 1905: 183–4; Scharff 1926: 56.

15 Williams 1986: 130, pls. 103b, 104a.

16 Petrie and Quibell 1896: 14, pl. vii.

17 Petrie 1903: p. 20, no. 29, pl. iii; 28, pl. xi, no. 246; Scharff 1926:

63, no. 440, pl. 39; Petrie 1920: II, pl. viii, 25–28, pl. ix, 23; Scharff 1929: 59; Saleh/Sourouzzian 1987: no. II.

18 Amélineau 1899: 494–5, pl. xlvii, 8–11.

19 Amélineau 1899: pl. xlvii: 8.

20 Amélineau 1899: pl. xlvii: 11.

21 Amélineau 1899: pl. xlvii: 10; Mariemont (confused by Montet 1955: 190 with Brussels, Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, no. E 4180; Vandier 1964: 487, fig. 260).



Fig. 4.6 London, British Museum, 66216.



Fig. 4.7 Cairo, Egyptian Museum, JE 27354.

Nearly identical to the last, and thus almost certainly contemporary with it, is an unprovenanced board in the British Museum, (Fig. 4.6).²² This example displays the same ‘checkerboard’ slotting as Peribsen’s boards, but it possesses a true spiralling track of 83 slots, which coils about on itself five times and even has an abstract snake head in the centre. This board, however, differs from the foregoing in that it is raised on a low splayed foot much like the standard funerary offering tables of the period.

Three more boards, all unprovenanced share important similarities suggesting advances on the latter group. One is in the Cairo Museum (Fig. 4.7); another is in Berlin (Fig. 4.8); and the third is in the Petrie Museum, University College, London (Fig. 4.9).²³ Each is made of limestone, with its



Fig. 4.8 Berlin, Bode Museum, 13868.



Fig. 4.9 London, University College, Petrie Museum, 19602.

surface carved to simulate the body of a coiled serpent cut into many sections. In each the sculptors have greatly reduced the width of the slots from that of earlier boards, and have cut grooves between the coils to emphasize the outline of the snake’s body. The snake’s head in both the Berlin and Cairo boards is spade-shaped but lacks naturalistic surface details. The Petrie board, however, clarified the head and tail with incised details and cross-hatching, and even the serpent’s tongue protrudes. The Cairo board has 105 spaces; the Berlin, 92 and the Petrie, 73.

One important feature shared by each of these boards is a small knob or pointed projection at one end, which Henry Fischer has shown probably represents a stylized turtle’s head.²⁴ The Berlin and Petrie boards both have holes drilled

²² London, British Museum, no. 66216: limestone, dia. 37 cm, height of foot, 6.4 cm (Shore 1963: 88–91; Spencer 1980: 69, no. 490, pl. 57).

²³ Cairo, Egyptian Museum, JE 27354: green glazed faience (?), dia. 33 cm, stands on four low feet 4.5 cm high. Said to have been found at Quft (Petrie/Quibell 1896: 42; Ranke 1940: s. 7D; Vandier

1964: 488); Berlin, Bode Museum, 13868: limestone, dia. 27 cm.. With appendage 30.5 cm, average th. 2 cm. Said to have come from Abydos (Scharff 1926 II: 145, no. 274, pl. 33); London, University College, Petrie Museum, 19602: limestone, dia., 33.7 cm, 1. With appendage 36.7 cm, th. 4.2 cm (Petrie 1914: 25, no. 96, pl. xlii).

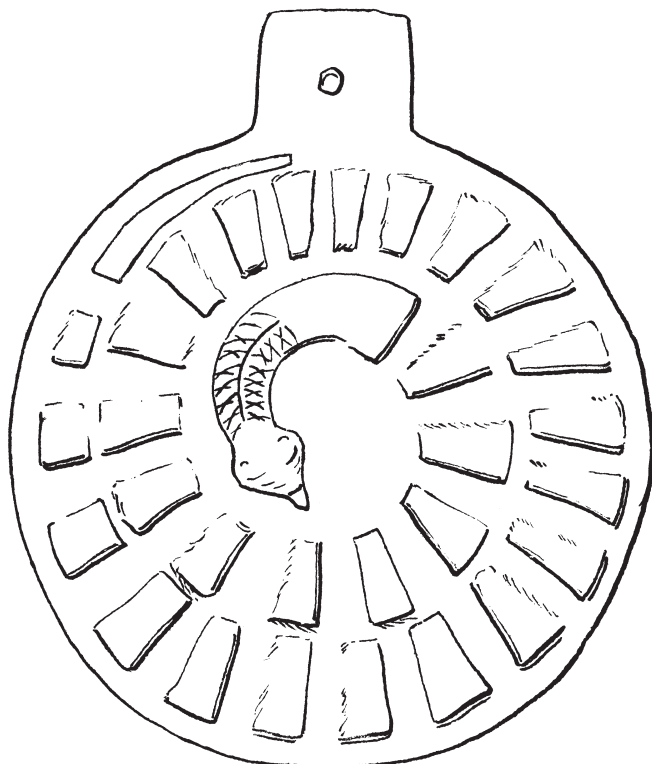


Fig. 4.10 From Tomb 19, Deir el-Ballas, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum.



Fig. 4.12 New York, Metropolitan Museum, 58.125.1.



Fig. 4.11 New York, private collection.

through these projections, indicating that they had a functional as well as an apparent amuletic purpose. Strings or thongs looped through this hole would have allowed the board to be suspended from a peg when not in use. Why these objects might have been associated with turtles will be suggested below.

Closely related to this example is the only other excavated mehen board, now in the Ashmolean, which was found by J. E. Quibell at Ballas (Fig. 4.10).²⁴ This object, which covered the lid of a pot, is probably only a model mehen board, since it is

only 10.5 cm in diameter. Its track is only 30 slots in length. The head of the snake has been clearly modeled with a protruding tongue, as in the Petrie board. Instead of the pointed 'turtle head' knob, however, it has a larger square projection at one end, anticipating the trapezoid on Hesy-Re's board. This, too, is pierced for suspension. A second model mehen board, now privately owned, survives in ivory and measures only 4.5 cm in diameter (Fig. 4.11).²⁵ Like the Ballas board, it was evidently the lid from a small container, possibly for cosmetics. Although very finely and delicately carved, the 'head' of the coil was not clearly defined as that of a snake. The body with its tapering tail, on the other hand, does indeed look serpentine and coils about on itself six times. It is also entirely incised with transverse lines forming the astonishing number of about 336 small spaces. Four of these spaces – 42, 143, 200 and 290 (when counted from the tail) – are drilled with small holes, which were probably originally filled with a coloured pigment or inlay. These special marked spaces almost certainly were intended to give a player some advantage or disadvantage in play, probably allowing a piece to move up or down a row. Like the earlier boards, there had been a flat 'turtle head' projection on one edge which was probably pierced with a pin, allowing the lid to swivel.

Bridging the gap between these objects and those that follow is an unusual board in the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 4.12).²⁶ This is a round slab of greenish slate, bearing a squared projection at one end, like the Ballas board. This tab, here unpierced, now seems to function as a platform on which the pieces could be lined up by the opponents before they began to play. Although in this feature the board parallels Hesy-Re's board and all the examples pictured in later tomb scenes, this extension appears on no other

24 Fischer 1968: 17, n. 38.

25 Oxford, Ashmolean Museum: limestone, w. 10.5 cm, l. 12.5 cm. From Tomb 19 at Ballas (Petrie/Quibell 1896: 42, pl. xliii, 2).

26 This object is presently (1990) owned by Mr Samuel Merrin, New York, to whom I am most grateful for permitting me to include it here.



Fig. 4.13a–b Mehen board E 253-40 from the side and top. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

surviving example. The Metropolitan board is also flat and was incised rather than carved, yet it must be admitted that in its details it parallels rather well the most developed series of boards, described below. The pieces used to play the game, however, can no longer have been marbles but rather flat-bottomed pawns.

The square extension on the Metropolitan board is clumsily incised with the name of Horus Aha of the First Dynasty, which is a troubling detail. A board of this form seems much more advanced than the excavated examples of Peribsen of the Second Dynasty, which were also designed to employ marbles as pieces. I cannot account for this except to suggest that the board is a modern forgery, or that the incised name is a modern forgery, or that both the board and incised name are original and belonged to an entirely different Archaic regional tradition. There are, in fact, many mehen marbles bearing the name of King Aha and others of the First Dynasty, but the authenticity of these incised names has also been called into question.²⁷ Support for the authenticity of the Metropolitan board is suggested by the curious incised markings on its reverse, which, as Fischer has noted, closely

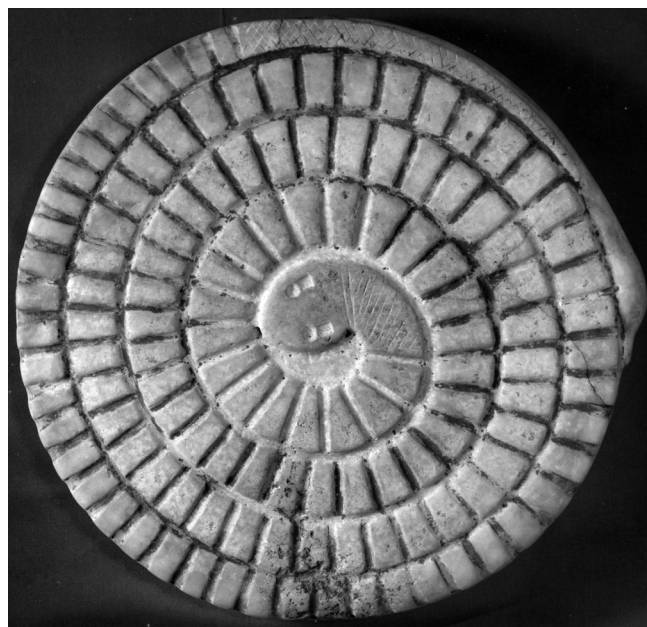


Fig. 4.14 Chicago, Oriental Institute Museum, 16950.

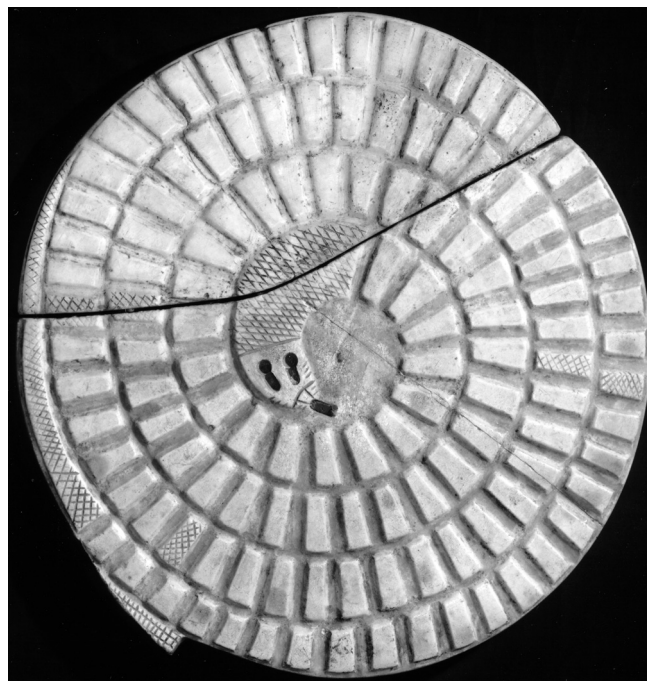


Fig. 4.15 Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, Eg. A. 4464.1943.

parallel those on the underside of an Archaic figurine of a turtle.²⁹ This suggests a close relationship with the Cairo, Berlin and Petrie Museum boards, all of which bear small residual turtle heads.

The final examples of mehen boards closely parallel Hesy-Re's, although they all lack the trapezoidal projection. They, too, are essentially flat and were clearly designed to be used with flat-bottomed playing pieces. In date they are probably later than the Third Dynasty. These examples are in the Louvre, the Oriental Institute Museum in Chicago and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

27 New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 58.12.1: greenish slate, w. 27 cm, l. 32.1 cm, th. 1.2–2.2 cm. Said to have been found at Abydos. (*Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Oct. 1959: 63; Fischer 1968: 17 n. 38; this object was intensively researched by Eric Young, who also prepared an extensive file on the mehen game, which is now kept in the Egyptian Department at the Metropolitan Museum. This file has been a valuable resource for

me, and I wish not only to acknowledge Young's contribution to the study of mehen but also to thank Dr Dorothea Arnold, Curator of Egyptian Art at the Metropolitan, both for making Young's notes available to me and for allowing me to publish the Metropolitan mehen board).

28 Spencer 1980: 69, nos 491–2, pl. 57; Kaplony 1965: 6.

29 Fischer 1968: 17 n. 38.

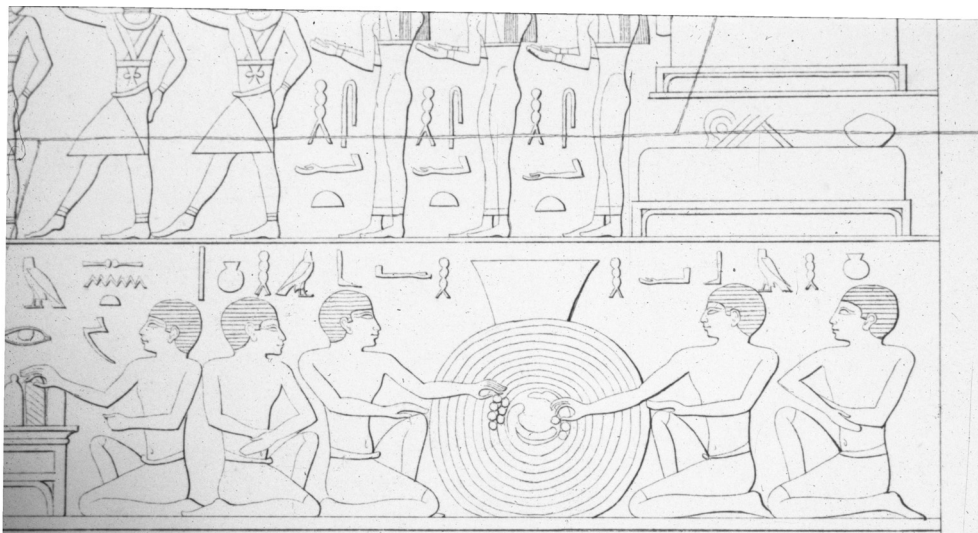


Fig. 4.16 Game scene, tomb of Rashepses, Saqqara, after Lepsius... (details missing?)

The Louvre board, like that in the British Museum, is perched atop a stand and thus has the appearance of an offering table (Fig. 4.13a–b).³⁰ The serpent, coiled five times upon itself, is carved into the flat surface with precision in shallow grooves. Its back is cut into 137 sections. The serpent's eyes are inlaid in black stone, and its tongue is of red paste. The snake's tail has been carved as the head of a duck or goose.

Somewhat similar is a board in the Oriental Institute Museum, which was purchased in Luxor in 1932 (Fig. 4.14).³¹ Here too is a tightly-coiled serpent, also bearing a duck head for a tail, whose body is cut into 127 sections. The Fitzwilliam board, while lacking the duck head, is virtually identical, with the serpent's body cut into 126 sections (Fig. 4.15).³² One important feature of the latter ties it to the ivory model mehen described above, for here again we find the use of specially marked spaces, now incised with cross-hatching, which obviously indicated places where the pieces, moving up or down the tail, could take shortcuts from one coil to another.

From the appearance of all these boards, it is clear that the number of slots on the back of the coiled serpent was never standardized and had no effect on the play of the game except to make it longer or shorter. The tracks also run clockwise or counter-clockwise, a detail which also seems to have been irrelevant to the game or its meaning. On average the boards had no less than thirty nor more than 140 places. The 300+ places of the Hesy-Re board or the ivory mehen model board seem excessive for a real game. These may, in fact have been intended only as games for eternity – which would have taken an eternity to play.

At present, none of the surviving pieces or boards for mehen can be dated securely to a period later than the Third Dynasty, but some of the more developed boards may well belong to the later Old Kingdom. We know the game continued to be played throughout the Old Kingdom, for it appears occasionally in wall reliefs in tombs of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties. Just as pictures and lists of specific commodities on tomb walls of an earlier period were thought to be magical substitutes for the real thing, so, too, by the

Fourth Dynasty, were scenes of daily life thought essential for the wealthy tomb owner, providing him throughout eternity with the familiar surroundings and personalities of his earthly milieu. By the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties this form of decoration had evolved to such a level of complexity that almost every conceivable detail of everyday existence can be found represented on tomb walls, although the limited scenes in individual tombs were doubtless chosen by the tomb owner before his death to reflect his own preferred pastimes or subjects – those he would have been the most unwilling to do without in the next world. Presumably scenes of board games, which are by no means common, were ordered for tombs only by those who enjoyed them the most.

Game scenes appear in tomb reliefs as part of wider compositions depicting social gatherings, or in panoramas depicting the various popular forms of entertainment. These are sometimes said to comprise games actually performed as part of funeral rites. These scenes, like every vignette, are accompanied by short inscriptions labelling them or recording the words of the players, giving them an immediacy somewhat akin to single frames of comic strips cut out of context. The texts are cryptically brief and not always clear, but they allow us to see the excitement of the play even if we cannot fully grasp what is going on.

Scenes of mehen games, when they occur, always appear together with scenes of senet. Curiously, senet is represented in at least twelve Old Kingdom tombs, usually alone,³³ while mehen appears in only four of these tombs and never without the other game. If these numbers are any indication of popularity, it is possible that mehen's may already have been waning during the later Old Kingdom, perhaps helping to explain the game's subsequent mysterious disappearance.

The earliest representation of a mehen game in progress is found in the Saqqara tomb of Rashepses, a vizier of King Isesi, penultimate king of the Fifth Dynasty (Fig. 4.16).³⁴ This tomb is of particular interest in that it features the game in two nearly identical scenes in different chambers. In each scene four persons are shown playing the game, again supporting the evidence from Hesy-Re's tomb that up to six could play at

30 Paris, Louvre, no. E. 25340: calcite, dia. 40 cm, ht. of foot 17 cm (*Les Merveilles du Louvre* I [1958]: 136; Vandier 1964: 488).

31 Chicago, Oriental Institute Museum, 16950: calcite, dia. 38 cm, th. 4.5 cm. Purchased in Luxor in 1932 (Piccione 1990: 46–7).

32 Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, Eg. A. 4464. 1943 (Swinley 1980: 69 n. 9, pl. x).

33 Pusch 1979: 6–40, pls I–12.

34 Lepsius 1849–56: Abt. II, Bl. 61b.

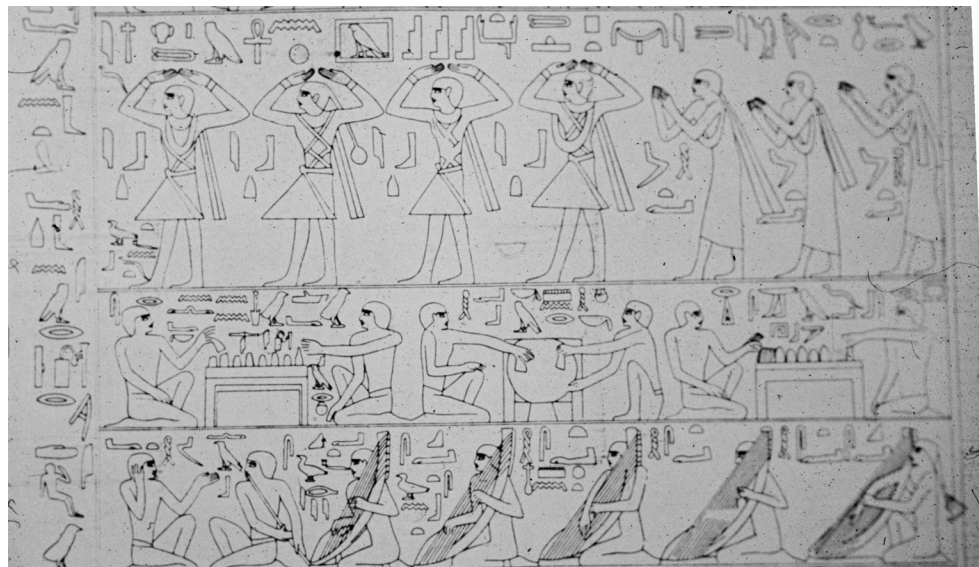


Fig. 4.17 Game scene, tomb of Idu, Giza (G 7102).

once. A pair of players sit on the ground on each side of the board, which is shown with its trapezoidal projection up. The two nearest the board each extend a hand over its centre coil, as if to reach for the several small marbles clustered there. The caption over the scene, which is written above each pair of players, reads simply *h^b mh(n)* ('playing mehen').

A third mehen game appears in the Sixth Dynasty tomb of Idu at Giza (G7102) (Fig. 4.17)³⁵ Here, one wall depicts the owner, seated in a stationary palanquin, gazing upon four registers of figures engaged in funerary games said to be in honour of the goddess Hathor. Here are boys' physical sports, groups of dancers, musicians, and hand-clappers, and three board games: a mehen between two senet games, each played by a pair of players. In this instance, the trapezoidal projection of the mehen board is directed downward, and the board is framed by the outline of a wooden table. The players sit opposite one another, each holding a single counter over the board surface. These pieces, which are flat-bottomed and conical in shape, again suggest that the earlier cupped boards with their marble pieces had given way to flat boards with conical pieces by this time. The words above the scene are evidently those of the player on the right, who merely states: *h^b k(wi) mnh* (sic) *r.k.* ('I am playing mehen against you').

Two other Giza tombs possess almost identically-composed scenes in which the enlarged figure of the tomb owners appear playing senet with diminutive opponents, while other ancillary pairs of players nearby indulge in mehen, all to the accompaniment of lyres and flutes. In the tomb of Isesi-mery-netjer (G 2097) the mehen scene has been almost entirely destroyed,³⁶ but in that of Ka'emankh (G4561) (Fig. 4.18) it remains complete.³⁷ In each case the board is shown without a table, with its projection up, again suggesting that it was simply resting on the ground. In the latter relief, the two players hold no visible pieces but merely sit beside the board with their arms extended and their hands closed into fists. Short phrases are written over each player as if these were his very words. On the right, one says: *it.t mhn* ('Seizing mehen', which might mean either 'gaining advantage in mehen', 'seizing the lead in mehen' or merely

'My turn'). To this the other responds: *ms.(i) r.k. h^b.(i) r.k* (perhaps 'I take aim at you and play toward you').

Although mehen, as we see it filtered through the evidence described here, would seem to have been a relatively simple secular pastime, there are indications that by the Old Kingdom, if not earlier, it had acquired certain religious associations. In the first place, the use of miniature, non-functional mehen boards as lids for small vessels deposited in the tomb, or the use of mehen boards as ornamentation for the tops of funerary offering tables, would be illogical unless the board itself had assumed some sort of universally-recognized symbolic, amuletic, or funerary significance. Furthermore, the fact that certain boards were carved with appendages looking like turtle heads or with markings on their undersides suggestive of turtles, or that others feature a duck or goose head emerging from the tail of the snake, begins to suggest a specificity of magical meaning that had nothing to do with the play of the game.

Fischer has shown that, by the Old Kingdom, the Nile turtle, with its vicious bite and its dark underwater existence, had come to be viewed by the Egyptians with deep suspicion and hostility, sentiments that are clearly articulated in texts of the Middle and New Kingdoms.³⁸ These texts indicate that the turtle, like all river denizens, was viewed as a mythological enemy of the sun god Re in his imagined nightly passage through the Underworld. The large numbers of small objects representing the turtle, dating from the Predynastic Period to the Middle Kingdom, may thus have been created to counteract the evils that this species evoked, and the turtles on the mehen boards would likely have had the same meaning.

The presence of the goose head on the end of the serpent's tail probably alludes to the primeval goose, called the 'Great Cackler', which in one very old tradition of the creation myth laid the egg which separated earth from heaven and from which the sun (Ra), in bird form, hatched.³⁹ The connection of the goose with the creation myth may indicate that by the Old Kingdom the serpent of the game board was conceptualized as the mythological snake Mehen, who protected the sun god in his coils.

³⁵ Simpson 1976: 25, fig. 38, pl. 24b.

³⁶ Pusch 1979: 29–32; pl. 9.

³⁷ Junker 1940: Abb. 9.

³⁸ Fischer 1968: 5–12.

³⁹ Rundle Clark 1991: 55–6, 213.

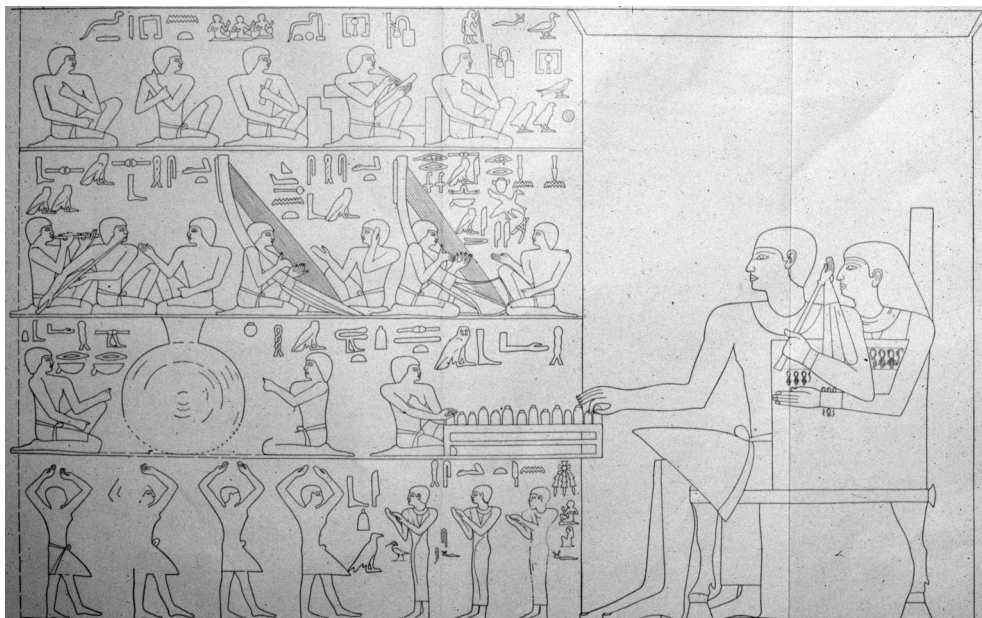


Fig. 4.18 Game scene, tomb of Kaemankh, Giza (G 4561).

That the mehen game should have acquired cosmological and funerary significance is hardly surprising. For centuries the game was on the list of tomb furnishings and was obviously commonly played at funerary rites. Just what significance the game acquired begins to be revealed in certain passages of the Pyramid Texts. These were the magical spells inscribed on the walls of the tomb chambers of the kings of the Sixth Dynasty and were believed to assist them, after death to attain everlasting life.⁴⁰ In Pyramid Text 332, for example, we find that the serpent of the mehen game has been deliberately confused or syncretized with a serpent deity called Mehen, whose name has been written with the hieroglyph representing the game board. So scanty is the evidence that it is not possible to know if the deity was inspired by the game, or whether the game was inspired by a pre-existing deity or mythology. Here, at any rate, the king is said to have ‘come forth from Mehen, having come (away) from his fiery breath’. The king’s journey is then likened to ‘traveling to the two skies’ and ‘returning to the Two Lands’. The implication is that the king has passed up the coils of Mehen to the head and then back again, a trek which is compared to an ascension to heaven (that is, death) and a return to earth, reborn with new life. The same sense can be understood from a spell in the Pyramid Texts of Queen Neith, late in the Sixth Dynasty, which states that the lady rests in the coils of a serpent deity called Neb-akhet (‘Lord of the Horizon’) ‘just as she resides in the mehen board’ and is born anew from the serpent’s head.⁴¹ Based on these texts, one would sense that the mehen game, during the Old Kingdom, was viewed as a simulation of some horrific ordeal which the dead were believed to undergo in the Netherworld, in which they had to pass up the body of a monstrous coiled serpent to his head without being devoured, and to return safely again to the tail, by which they were rewarded with rebirth. Victory in the game, in other words, seems to have become symbolic of the attainment of life after death.

As the mythology of the sun cult evolved during the First Intermediate Period, so too did the status and nature of the serpent god Mehen. Now he was conceptualized specifically as a gigantic snake who enveloped the Sun in its coils when it set, and who carried it safely aboard the solar bark on the river of night to the moment of dawn, protecting it from all the imagined threatening forces of the Underworld. Mehen’s role was essential, for if Re were not protected from these enemies, he might not rise in the morning, which would result in the cessation of all life. In Egyptian belief, ‘life’ applied not only to the living but also to the dead, who were believed to travel with the sun and to rise, reborn, with him at dawn.

Peter Piccione has recently demonstrated that during the First Intermediate Period, the god Mehen became the focus of a body of secret knowledge, occasionally referred to in the Coffin Texts as ‘Mysteries of Mehen.’⁴² The Coffin Texts themselves were a corpus of magical spells, which were commonly inscribed on the interiors of coffins of the First Intermediate Period and early Middle Kingdom, which were derived from the Pyramid Texts and with which it was believed that one could cheat death and attain eternal life.⁴³ The ‘Mysteries of Mehen’ alluded to in the Coffin Texts seem to have been a secret sub-order of magical spells of the same genre, by which those privy to them were thought to be able, after death, to become as one with Mehen, to vanquish the enemies of Re, to attain victory over their own enemies, and ultimately to achieve safe passage through the Underworld in company with Re to their own resurrection and rebirth. Even the oblique allusions to these spells in the Coffin Texts reveal that Mehen was a god who not only protected the sun god in his coils but who also enveloped and constricted the god’s enemies, and it is easy to see how such concepts might have been transferred to a game board.

Spells 758–60 in the Coffin Texts speak of ‘the Roads of Mehen’, as though the coils of the great serpent were pictured as a series of circling roads leading to the sun god, who sat enthroned at their centre.⁴⁴ These roads, some of which were

⁴⁰ Faulkner 1969.

⁴¹ Piccione 1990: 47–51.

⁴² Piccione 1990: 43–52.

⁴³ Faulkner 1973–78.

⁴⁴ Piccione 1990: 44–6.

said to be ‘roads of fire ... millions of years in length’, were also said to have had gates ‘that turn away’. Those turned away, of course, would have been the enemies of Re, but others, like the privileged few who knew the secret passwords – ‘the Mysteries of Mehen’ – would have been able to open the gates and approach the god. If we imagine the ‘gates’ on the ‘roads of Mehen’ as squares or spaces on the game board, Spells 759 and 760 sound almost as though they were describing a mehen game:

Make way for me; open the gate for me, (oh) you (pl.) who are in Mehen, for I know the circuit of Re and those (gates) which are in him.

As for one who knows the name of those his roads, it is he who will enter Mehen,

As for the one who knows this spell, he does not perish forever; he will live on that which Re lives.⁴⁵

Apparently, during the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period, the game mehen, like senet during the New Kingdom, became an allegory of the struggle to conquer the terrors of the Underworld in order to achieve everlasting life. The start of the game for the players would have been conceived as the moment of death. Their struggle on the coiling track of the board would have been viewed as their journey upon the back of the serpent god Mehen, which formed ‘roads’ leading to the Sun God, the individual places on the board representing the various ‘gates.’ The winner, we may imagine, was he who succeeded in first passing up the coils to the snake’s head (and perhaps gaining union with Re) and passing back again, which guaranteed his own resurrection. Those left behind were probably thought to be those who, not knowing the proper spells, were ensnared by Mehen, or who were themselves likened to the enemies of Re. Achieving victory in mehen would probably also have been viewed as the equivalent of achieving an alliance with Mehen or actually becoming as one with him.

Despite the evident profundity of meaning assumed by mehen during the First Intermediate Period or Early Middle Kingdom, all further evidence for the game abruptly ceases in Egypt at this point, the very moment when one would expect it to have become more popular than ever. This fact is extremely puzzling. Certainly the importance of the god Mehen did not wane. By the New Kingdom he had become a regular feature of the art of the Underworld, appearing now always as a great snake overarching the sun god as he stands on the night bark.

Curiously, in the New Kingdom Mehen is no longer mentioned in connection with a game called mehen. He has now become the patron deity of the senet game, which itself has taken on allegorical funerary meaning.⁴⁶ It is worth noting in this connection that in most of the New Kingdom representations of Mehen, he is shown not as a coiled serpent but as one in the pose of an ‘S’, turned sideways, with his body forming an arch over the standing figure of Re, and his forepart and head reared up again before the god. It can be no coincidence that this same S-shaped form is that of the track of play on the senet board!⁴⁷

It is difficult to account for the disappearance of mehen. Games, especially such popular ones, are unlikely to have



Fig. 4.19 Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, F. 1968/3.1. ???orientation

merely died out naturally. Nor is it easy to fathom why the Egyptians would have given up their only known board game in which more than two could play simultaneously.

I would suggest that the sudden demise or disappearance in art of mehen may have been a result of a serious religious concern: that the very ingredients which made the game so appealing may also have been those that made it dangerous in the minds of the priests of Re; in the same way that many superstitious individuals today shun the use of the ouija board. For mehen, the taboo can be explained in this way. The boards, which took the form of coiled snakes, had been traditionally slotted so as to contain the pieces. When the board was flat, the back of the snake was cut with numerous transverse lines or incisions to indicate the spaces. By the First Intermediate Period this cutting or slotting would have been viewed as tantamount to killing the snake. This is shown by the fact that all serpent hieroglyphs painted on coffins of the First Intermediate Period have their heads cut from their bodies, a detail which would have been thought to kill these snakes so as to protect the deceased from any possible harm they might have caused in the magic realm if they had ever come to life.⁴⁸ When the god Mehen entered mythology as the protector of the sun god, he and the snake of the game board obviously merged symbolically, and the boards, depicting cut snakes, obviously would have been seen by some as very dangerous magic, weakening or killing Mehen and possibly threatening the life of the Sun, and would no longer have been sanctioned. I would propose that already by the Eleventh or Twelfth Dynasties the game, as played on formal boards of the traditional sort, would probably have been forbidden everywhere.

An odd reinforcement of this idea is provided by a limestone board in Leiden, which portrays a finely carved coiled serpent whose tail terminates in a goose head (Fig. 4.19). It appears to be a mehen board and is similar in size

45 Piccione 1990: 44–5.

46 Kendall 1978: 50, 56–8, fig. 32.

47 See the contribution by P. Piccione in this volume.

48 Lacau 1913.



Fig. 4.21 Game scene from an unknown tomb of Dynasty XXVI, Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, 22.152.3.

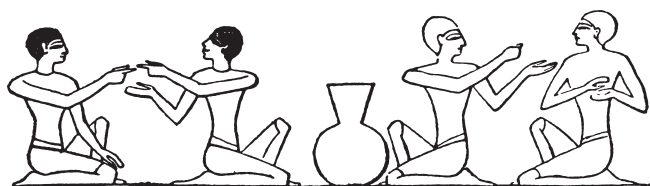


Fig. 4.20 Game scene from the tomb of Ibi, Thebes, Dynasty XXVI, after Wilkinson, 1883, vol. II, p. 55.

and form to all the others except that it has no slots or specially marked spaces on its back, nor any stable surface on which to set or move playing pieces since the snake's body is rounded. Conceivably it was just an amuletic device, which had no other purpose than to affirm that the snake was not cut, and that the god Mehen would continue to live forever to protect the Sun.

If the mehen game ceased to be played on serpent-shaped boards and was shunned by name in texts, it probably continued as a simple game played informally with pebbles and sticks on crude spirals of holes drawn in the sand or pecked in stone. This is suggested by a body of evidence recovered in Cyprus, Crete and the Cyclades from Middle Bronze Age contexts, in which there is no doubt that the game in question is mehen. Obviously many foreign peoples visited Egypt throughout the Old and Middle Kingdoms and could have picked up their games and carried them back to their homeland. The Egyptians, too, traveled would have carried their games wherever they went.

In Swiny 1976 and 1980, Stuart Swiny published numerous round stone slabs from the site of Episkopi Phaneromeni on Cyprus, which had been decorated with running spirals of sunken cavities. Some of the stones bore such patterns on two sides, and had pecked holes numbering from between 42 to 87. A great many other similar objects he noted came from Crete and the Cyclades, having as few as 12 holes to as many as 68, with isolated examples having 80+ and 197 holes. Some of these are obviously merely offering tables, with depressions for small food or liquid offerings, but there is no doubt that others were specifically for the play of mehen. This proven by the fact that some of the stones have crudely pecked patterns of 3 rows of ten holes - the senet game - on the reverse. The date of all these stones seems to be the early to mid-second millennium BC.

The fate of mehen after the second millennium is unknown. If it continued to be played in Egypt after the First Intermediate Period, no documentation of it has yet been forthcoming other than two curious tomb reliefs of the mid-first millennium BC – over a thousand years later in date. One relief appears in the Twenty-sixth Dynasty tomb of Ibi at Thebes of the late seventh century BC (Fig. 4.20), while another, now in the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, derived from a slightly later unidentified tomb at Memphis (Fig. 4.21).⁴⁹ Texts in each of these reliefs actually describe the pictured game as mehen; and in each pairs of players are shown seated on opposite sides of a mehen board. The board itself is shown just as it appears in the earlier tombs of Rashepses and Ka'emankh, with its trapezoidal projection up, except that no surface details have been indicated.

One might assume from these scenes that *mehen* continued to be played until the Late Period, were it not for the fact that the relief style is so deliberately archaizing, a popular trend of the time. In this, both scenes seem almost pure recreations of the Old Kingdom style, except that the players strike poses quite different from their counterparts in the Old Kingdom tomb scenes. In the tomb of Ibi, the two players nearest the mehen board look away from it, as if to hand something to the players behind them. In the Walters relief, all four players look away from the board, although two seem to be holding bags of marbles. From these scenes it is impossible to know whether the ancient game is actually being played as always, or whether it had been revived in the Late Period, or whether the players here are, in fact, playing another marble game beside a mehen board and are deliberately ignoring the latter, as if to recognize its ancient significance as a game but that it must not be played for ritual reasons.

In 1921 R. Davies published a most extraordinary living parallel to mehen from the Sudan.⁵⁰ It was a game he had observed among the Kababish nomads in central Kordofan, called *Li'b el Merafib* or the 'Hyena Game'. It was played on a spiralling track of holes marked out in the sand. Each player moved a single piece, a stick, which he called his 'mother'. The first hole on the outside was called the 'village'; the last or central hole was called the 'well'; and each hole in

49 TT 36: The tomb of Ibi (Wilkinson 1883: 55 no. 317); Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, 22.152.3. From the unknown tomb at

Memphis (Capart 1938: 13–18; Steindorff 1946: no. 274, pl. 54).
50 Davies 1925: 145–6.

between was called a 'day's journey'. By casts of three split reeds or flat sticks, which served as two-sided dice, the players moved their mothers from the village to the well, although they could not begin to move their mothers on their journey until they had first obtained a throw of 'one' on the dice. Once she reached the well by exact count, each mother was required to stay and drink, and 'wash her clothes'. Here, in order to take her drink, each mother's son had to throw two 'ones' on the dice. To wash her clothes she required another similar throw, and to leave she needed two more. The player whose mother first returned to the village released a new piece called a 'hyena'. The hyena raced back to the well at a double pace to take a drink, and after waiting there for a series of required throws, raced back again, now trying to gobble up any 'mother' still trying to get back to the village. Davies noted of this game: 'The hyena may be said to be the winner, but there are degrees of defeat. The player whose mother gets eaten by the hyena is rudely mocked by the one who manages to get the old lady safely back to the village.'⁵¹

In all essential details the 'Hyena Game' seems to parallel mehen. It was played on a spiraling track, employed flat stick dice of precisely the kind known from Archaic Egyptian contexts, and had two types of pieces, one representing a predatory animal. The only difference would seem to be that the ancient Egyptians allotted six counters to each player rather than only one. Presumably in antiquity each player would have attempted to move his six pieces to the centre – to the hole in front of the snake's head – there to wait for the difficult combination of throws that allowed him to escape and return back down the tail. The first player to get all his marbles back to the start would in a sense win, for he now would gain the right to use the lion pieces. Since the lion pieces are not distinguished by colour (only by sex), it would appear that one player probably used all of them, exchanging his marbles for lions as he completed the track of each marble. After racing his lions to the centre and then bringing them back again, he would then have attempted to gobble up the marbles of the other players, who might have been still struggling to exit safely from the snake's tail, so that among the other players it would be a race for survival. As has been observed of the ritual meaning of mehen, the first player to exit the board may well have been thought actually to *become* Mehen, so that the small lion pieces may have been conceptualized as the instruments by which the snake could destroy the 'enemies of Re'. Those who safely exited the board in the face of the lions were probably considered fortunate in being victorious over their enemies, and would have been thought to have achieved eternal life, while those who were devoured were probably compared to the Evil Ones of the Underworld. They too would probably have suffered the same shame and derision as the Kababish whose 'mother' had been devoured by the 'hyena'.

Postscript

This paper is a revised and expanded version of the author's articles 'Schlangenspiel' (Kendall 1983) and 'An Ancient Egyptian Boardgame among the Kababish? An

Ethnoarchaeological Ponderable in Kordofan' (Kendall 1989). Since it was completed in 1990, certain studies on mehen have been published since which should be consulted by anyone interested in this game:

- 1 W. Decker/M. Herb, *Bildatlas zum Sport im Alten Ägypten. Corpus der Bildlichen Quellen zu Leibesübungen, Spiel, Jagd, Tanz und Verwandten Themen*. Handbuch der Orientalistik, Erste Abteilung. Der Nahe und Mittlere Osten 14. Leiden, 1994.
- 2 B. Rothöler, *Ägyptische Brettspiele ausser Senet*, unpublished MA thesis, Philosophical Fakultät I der Bayerischen Julius-Maximilians-Universität, Würzburg, 1997.
- 3 B. Rothöler, 'Mehen, God of the Boardgames', *Board Games Studies* 2 (1999): 10–23.

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⁵¹ Davies 1925: 146.

- Egypt's Golden Age: The Art of Living in the New Kingdom 1558-1080 BC*: 263–72. Boston.
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