

The Game

There are numerous sources describing and illustrating the playing of board games as a popular activity in classical Greek cities. Particularly famous is the amphora shown above of Achilles and Ajax playing some sort of board game. However, the primary sources do not provide foundational material that would indicate much in the manner of their play. Roland Austin describes the study of these games as, “a journey into complete darkness.”¹ Despite this pessimistic assessment of the ability to recreate these games, numerous attempts have been made to do so. Most become the subject of scholarly criticism due to a number of factors: poor interpretation or confabulation of sources, poorly made assumptions based on other games, and statements of play based on author’s impression of what makes a game “playable.” Despite these, it does seem possible that a reasonable reconstruction of a set of rules for at least one game based on the evidence available.

To do so, first the evidence that is available must be discussed. Austin makes a clear separation between πεττεια (*'petteia'*), or board games played without dice, and κυβοι (*'kuboi'*),

¹ Roland G. Austin, *Greek Board Games*, *Antiquity*, 14, September, 1940, pg 260.

or board games played with dice.² His further analysis of the sources causes him to argue that only three classical Greek board games are mentioned by name, and only one, *πολεις* ('poleis'), or the game of cities, is mentioned in any detail at all.³

Pollux, the most detailed written source says the following of it:

'the game played with many pieces is a board (*πλινθιον*) with spaces disposed among lines; the board is called "city" and each pie a "dog" (*κυων*); the pieces are of two colours, and the art of the game consists in taking a piece of one colour by enclosing it between two of the other colour."⁴

The only other source to provide any details is Photius, who states that sixty pieces are used, beyond which there is little other evidence of play.

Some primary sources do add some further details by referring to the game in other contexts. Plato regards the game as a science⁵, metaphorically describes Socrates' victims as:

'bad *petteia*-players, who are finally cornered and made unable to move by clever ones'⁶

He also describes his ideal state in its terms, saying:

'none of them is one city, but many cities, as they say in the game of cities'⁷

and uses it in the context of a fight between two cities. Aristotle also compares the cityless man to an isolated game piece in *pettoi* in *Pol.* 1253a. Euripides also references the game when the Theban herald says to Theseus:

'You give me this one advantage, as in *pestoi*, for my city is captained by one man, not by a mob'⁸

Much later Polybius describes Scipio in similar terms:

'he destroyed many men without a battle by cutting them off and blockading them, like a clever *petteia*-player'⁹

While these quotes do not provide direct examples of play, they do at least provide some insight into the way the game was considered; namely as a thoughtful game with military connotations where skill at play was critical.

² Roland G. Austin, *Greek Board Games*, *Antiquity*, 14, September, 1940, pg 260.

³ Roland G. Austin, *Greek Board Games*, *Antiquity*, 14, September, 1940, pg 263.

⁴ *Pollux IX*, 98

⁵ Plato, *RP 333B*

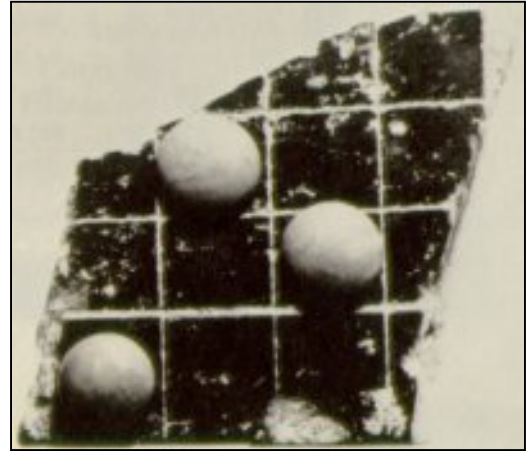
⁶ Plato, *RP 333b*

⁷ Plato, *RP 422E*

⁸ Euripides. *Suppl.* 409

⁹ Polybius, *I 84*

Archeology also provides some direct evidence of the game. Excavations at the agora in Athens have revealed the fragments of several games boards and pessi. The boards are fragmentary, so size cannot be determined, but the pieces match Pollux's description, as shown in the picture to the right excavated from the Agora in Athens of three glazed ceramic pieces on a fragment of a board.



At this point, attempts at reconstruction based on these sources break down, as we have no clear evidence of the size of the board or how the pieces move. Previous reconstructions have then referred to *Latrunculi*, a Roman board game of very similar appearance for which there is more evidence. It is believed that *Latrunculi* is a relative or merely the Roman version of *Poleis*, as sources describing the method of capture, and the boards and pieces are similar.



One key piece of additional evidence that can be gained from *Latrunculi* is board size, as there are a number of extant boards and fragments. What is clear from these is that there is no standard, and dimensions vary among the surviving board in a range of 7-12 in each dimension, and boards were not always square. The sources are still not clear on the distance moved, but a remarkable archeological find of a *latrunculi* board with a game in progress in Stanway, England shown to the left reveals several details not available in other evidence:

- Pieces were placed in a line at opposite edges of the board.
- Black played first.
- Pieces moved up to two squares on the move.
- Pieces could move orthogonally.

Even with these there is a fair amount of conjecture as to how the game is played. Several suppositions have been presented in other reconstructions:

- At the beginning of the game the players alternate placing their pieces on the board freely;
- Pieces may move backward;
- Pieces may move sideways;
- The move may be any distance;
- Pieces may "jump" friendly and enemy pieces.

Some of these points have been discussed in a review of Roman sources by Dr. Ulrich Schädler of the Swiss Museum of Games in his reconstruction of *Latrunculi*:

1. The players place one stone on any vacant square. In this first phase of the game, the pieces are called "vagi". During this initial phase no captures are made (nor are any

counters surrounded during this phase considered captured at the beginning of the second phase). When all the pieces have been placed, the second phase of the game begins.

2. Pieces can now be moved orthogonally to any adjacent square, that's why they are called "ordinarii" now. A counter can jump over any single stone, if the square behind it is not occupied. Thus multiple jumps in one turn are possible (as in draughts).
3. If a player can trap an enemy stone between two of his own, the stone is blocked and cannot be moved. Such a stone is called "alligatus".
4. In his next (or any other) turn the player can remove the captured stone from the board, if the two surrounding stones themselves are free. One free stone and one captured stone or two captured stones cannot do any harm to an enemy piece. A blocked stone is immediately free, if one of the two enemies or both are themselves surrounded, and can help to catch an enemy.
5. A player can move a stone between two enemies only if by this move one of the two is captured, i.e. "suicide" is not allowed.
6. If one player has only one piece left on the board, the game is finished.¹⁰

While the Stanway find tends to contradict the first point, Dr. Schädler argues that the following section of "In Praise of Piso" is a strong argument for deploying the pieces at the beginning of the game.

"Cunningly the pieces are disposed on the open board, and battles are fought with soldiery of glass, so that now white captures black, now black captures white"¹¹

He also refutes the common attribution of the rook move to the pieces in the game with the following quote from Ovid.

"how the different coloured soldier marches forth in a straight line, when a piece caught between two adversaries is imperilled, how one advancing may be skilful to attack and rescue a piece moved forward, and retreating may move safely not uncovered"¹²

This quote, and experimental play have shown that the rook move allows pieces to be recovered from danger fairly easily, and are strong arguments for limiting the move to a single square. However, it does not stand as a strong argument for pieces being able to jump others.

One conclusion that may be drawn from this discrepancy is that there may be variants to the play of *latrunculi*. A linear deployment at the back edge of the board as found at Stanway would speed the start of play. However, the pieces would be relatively far apart, and slower to engage.

Myron Samsin has mapped a number of similarities between *poleis*, *latrunculi*, and the play of the pawn in what we know of early chess, including relating the capture of enemy pieces on the diagonal as an evolution of the capture in *poleis* and *latrunculi*. He also makes an argument for the double first move for a piece being an element play.¹³ The addition of the

¹⁰ Lantrunculi, a forgotten Roman game of strategy rediscovered, *Abstract Games* 7, 2001

¹¹ *Laus Pisonis*, trans. Roland G. Austin

¹² Ovid, *Tristia* II 477-480

¹³ Myron J Samsin, *Towards a Pre-History of Chess*, 2002

double move when playing with a linear deployment would speed up initial play, and may be a feature of a variant with fixed deployment.

One other clear difference between *latrunculi* and *poleis* is left outstanding: the number of pieces. Photius' count of sixty pieces in play is much larger than the single line per player in the Stanway find, or the 8-24 in Dr. Schädler's and other *latrunculi* reconstructions.

However, these points still leave a few questions unanswered:

- When removing a piece can a player move, or does taking the piece into hand count as his move?
- Can a piece move into a "captured" position?
- Can a piece jump others or not?
- Can it jump both friendly and enemy pieces?
- Are the fixed and free deployment of pieces both playable variants?

In order to study the playability a series test games were played, and where the results have been relevant to the reconstruction they have been noted in italics. In particular, it was found that regardless of the variables introduced into the reconstruction the game would tend to play to a draw. It was determined that the game needed some additional elements in order to resolve the impasse. The questions above have been worked into the reconstruction as experimental variants, and require further testing to determine their effect on playability.

Reconstruction

The Board

Play may be made on a board whose dimensions are within the range of 7x7 to 12x12.

Varying board size did not seem to substantively impact the play of the game.

The Pieces

Players may choose to play with a number of pieces between one and three times the width of the board.

Increasing the number of pieces beyond a number equal to a single width of the board increased playability and added a more sophisticated tactical element to the game.

Setup

Players start with their pieces arranged in rows, one per square, at the back edge of opposite sides of the board.

Experimental Deployment:

Players take turns deploying pieces on the board in any position they see fit.

Play testing universally consisted of games starting from lines of pieces on opposite edges of the board. The addition of freely deploying the pieces at the beginning may introduce an additional tactical element that will help resolve the stalemate problem.

Movement

Pieces may move one square orthogonally. Pieces may not move into a square occupied by another piece, either their own or their opponents. In addition, the first move may be two squares straight ahead when starting from formed lines on opposite edges of the board.

Experimental Movement:

- Pieces may jump over a friendly piece if there is a clear space beyond.
- Pieces may jump over an enemy piece if there is a clear space beyond.
- Pieces may move into a captured position.

Test games showed that orthogonal movement was essential to the play of the game, as otherwise pieces on the outside files were invulnerable in the game. In addition, testing with the rook's move for pieces showed that while it made for a faster game, it did not resolve the problem of stalemates. In addition, the rook's move makes it too easy to retrieve pieces that had been overcommitted.

Capturing Pieces

A piece is considered captured and may not move when it is between two enemy pieces

A player may take a captured enemy piece off the board instead of making a move.

Experimental Capture Options:

- A player may take up a piece and move.

The End of the Game

When either player cannot make a legal move or has no pieces remaining the game is over.

Victory

The winner is the player who captured the most pieces. If both players have captured the same number of pieces the player who may still make a legal move wins the game. If neither may move then the game is a draw.

A Note on the Style of Play

While what game is being played is unclear on the vases depicting games, a possible subtle point on play may be indicated by the poses of Achilles and Ajax on the amphora in the title line of this article. It is worth noting that neither player is leaning back, watching the other play. Both lean forward avidly, attention on the board, and both have their hands on the pieces. This is not the appearance of a chess game, where careful consideration precedes each move. Rather it would seem to indicate a quick moving game, where players were expected to bring their wits to bear and rapidly decide on their move as quickly as possible. Similar poses abound on other amphora, such as the one shown to the right, where the player's hands are poised over the board and the Athena, the goddess of wisdom and battle watches their play.

Further, the two players are noted as counting out the numbers "three" and "four". It is possible that these represent the players calling out their score. Roman sources also describe the captured pieces being shaken in the hand and clattering together.

