

AN EGYPTIAN GAME IN ASSYRIA

By C. J. GADD

IT is the purpose of this article to gather from a variety of places and publications the examples (known to me) of a particular form of game-board which was in use, at widely different periods, over a very large area of the ancient East, and to point out one historical fact which seems to have a clear connexion with it.

The game in question is that which has been called,¹ for want of any other name, the Game of Fifty-eight Holes. In all cases but one the only requisites of the game which have survived are the boards upon which it was played, and these show in general a striking resemblance, not only in the arrangement of the holes, but in the shape of the whole object, which is roughly rectangular, but has one of the short sides straight while all of the other sides are curved, the long ones concave, the remaining short one convex. Despite individual variations this general form is common to all but a very few of the examples; it has been aptly compared with an axe-blade. As to the holes, there is always a line of these following the edges of the board and two straight lines down the middle. Occasionally the middle displays some pictorial device, a palm-tree, or a pair of eyes, so contrived that it marks out the end (?), or winning-point, of the game; but this feature is rare. The holes are arranged in groups so that, in all but one particular area, four ordinary holes occur between special holes which are always distinguished either by a mark, an inlay, or the end of certain lines connecting them with other holes of the same kind. In the middle of the curved short side is always a central hole of the special kind, generally marked in the same way as the others, but occasionally made larger, or even signaled by a sign of its own. In the particular area referred to, which is on the middle lines towards the straight end of the board, there is always a pair of groups of three special holes with only one ordinary hole dividing them.

Objects of this kind have been found in Egypt, and doubtless this was their origin; at least the earliest examples are Egyptian. The following are known to me:

Ninth to Tenth Dynasty, from Sedment (PETRIE and BRUNTON, *Sedment*, I, pls. XXI, XXII, and pp. 7, 12).

Eleventh Dynasty, from Thebes (WINLOCK, *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum*, 1928, Section II, p. 10).

Twelfth Dynasty, from Thebes (CARNARVON and CARTER, *Five Years' Explorations at Thebes*, pl. L, and pp. 56 ff.). This was accompanied by ten carved ivory pins, with heads of dogs and jackals—the only case in which the playing pieces have been found.

¹ By SIR FLINDERS PETRIE, in *Objects of Daily Use*, 55. The name is not suitable, for, although the arrangement of the holes is in all cases visibly identical, the actual number varies slightly. It

might be better to call it Hounds and Jackals, with Mr. Howard Carter (in CARNARVON and CARTER, *Five Years' Explorations at Thebes*, 56 ff.), to whom the comparison with an axe-blade is also due.

Twelfth Dynasty, from el Lahun (PETRIE, *Kahun, Gurob, and Hawara*, pl. xvi).

In addition to these dated specimens, Sir Flinders Petrie also refers (*Sedment*, I, 8, pl. xxii) to two more in the Cairo Museum, one of which has two eyes at the ending point, and the other appears to be a summary representation of the human form. The curious and unique figure of a frog in the Louvre, mentioned and sketched in the same place, is uncertain both in date and origin.

Outside of Egypt these 'boards' have hitherto been found in two places,¹ very wide apart, Palestine and Elam. The first is represented by a find at Gezer (MACALISTER, *Gezer*, II, 416, fig. 501). This object again has the 'human' form, and its character is certain,² despite the author's disbelief at the time of publication. The date of this object may be about 1400–1000 B.C., and therefore considerably later than the Egyptian 'boards'. Elam is represented by several fragmentary specimens all found in the same place, namely, among the foundation-deposits of a temple built at Susa by the king Shilhak-In-Shushinak, who reigned in the latter part of the twelfth century B.C., and the 'boards' are therefore at least contemporary. They have been published by M. de Mecquenem in the *Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse*, VII, 104–6. One of these has the unique feature of occupying one face of a 'board', of which the reverse is differently shaped, and marked out in squares for another kind of game.

Being thus known in Egypt, Palestine, and Elam, it would be surprising if this game had not been played also by the Babylonians and Assyrians. It is proposed to quote or illustrate here several examples of the same kind of 'board' from these regions, which prove that there also it was familiar.

1. The first is that in the Constantinople Museum, No. 4646, published³ by Essad Nassouhi in *R.A.*, XII, 17 ff. This 'curieux monument néo-assyrien', once attention has been drawn to the fact, is visibly a fragment of one of these 'boards'. Details to be observed are: the stone of its material (*marbre rouge veiné, marbre originaire d'Égypte*), the peculiar contour of the edge, the characteristic figures sculptured upon it, the flat end E (*porte des mortaises et des tenons*), and the inscription on the reverse (*Esarhaddon*). All of these features will be found repeated in the sequel.

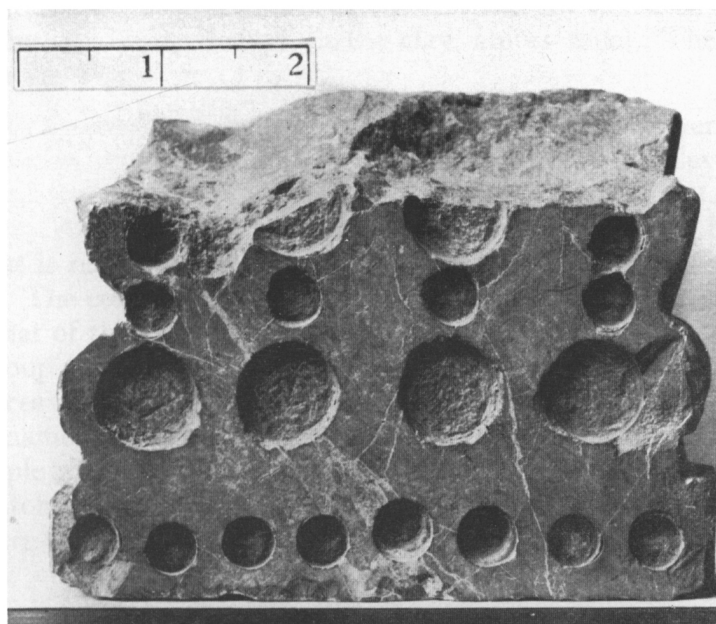
2. A plain, almost rectangular, clay plaque in the British Museum, No. 123331, here published for the first time (Plate VIII, *b*); it measures $4 \times 2\frac{11}{16} \times \frac{15}{16}$ in. This was found at Ur in Mr. J. E. Taylor's excavations of 1853–4. Despite its almost rectangular shape, the usual flatness of one short side and the convex curvature of the other is still just noticeable. The surface is a little

¹ These also are quoted by PETRIE, *Sedment*, I, loc. cit.

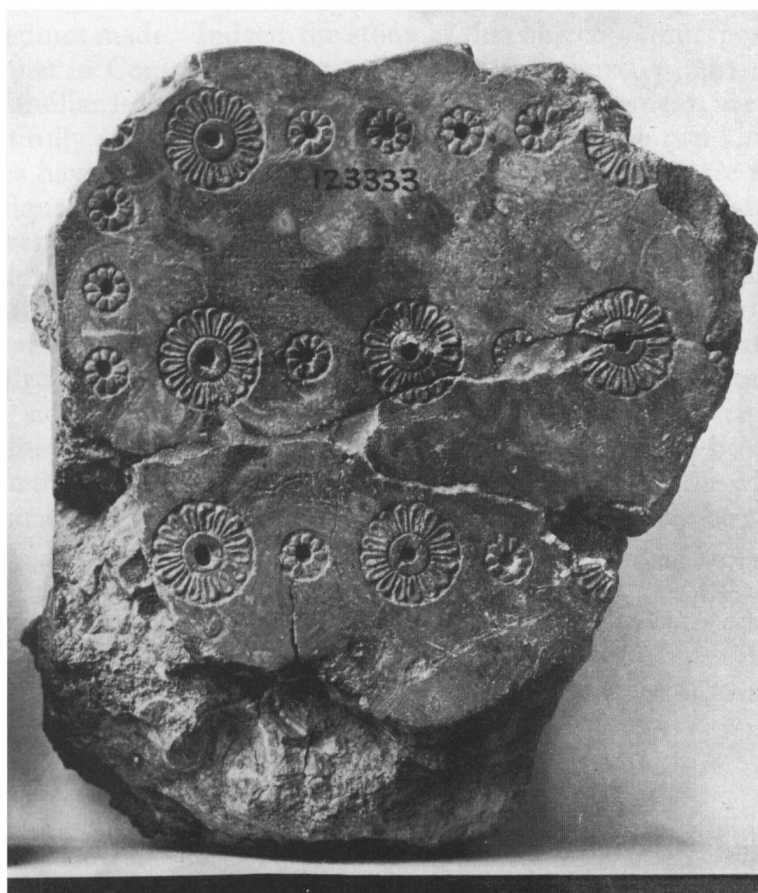
² If any other than ocular proof were needed it would be furnished by the detail that 'several of these holes were surrounded by a small circular spot

of darker red', doubtless the same holes as usually marked.

³ A photograph of the edge had already appeared in UNGER, *Untersuch. zur altorient. Kunst*, Tafel III, Abb. 6; cf. *ibid.*, 21.



(a) 12102



(b) 123333

FRAGMENTS OF ASSYRIAN GAME-BOARDS

damaged, but the arrangement of the holes, and the marking of the special positions by rosettes impressed in the clay, are as usual. There is nothing to indicate its date.

3. A fine specimen in dark-grey steatite, now in the University Museum of Pennsylvania, 13 cm. in length. Found at Ur by Mr. Woolley in the season 1931-2, and published by him in the *Antiquaries Journal*, XII. pl. LXXIV. 2, and p. 391. According to its position when found this may be of the late period, but is not necessarily so, since a fine Sumerian stone bowl lay quite near to it. The contour of the edges at the flat end is, it will be observed, the same as that of the Constantinople fragment. And the presence of an ornamental group (now broken) on the same end shows what was the purpose of the mortices which are seen in that fragment; they served to attach some similar ornament, as will be further illustrated in the ensuing instances. To this example may be appended the mention of another very small fragment in black stone, also from Ur, now in the British Museum, 1932-10-8, 38, hardly more than a chip.

4. B.M. 123333 (Plate VII, *b*) is a large fragment of a massive stone 'board' of this type. It measures $5\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{3}{4}$ in. and is $2\frac{3}{4}$ in. thick: the material is a coarse conglomerate with blotches of plum-red colour, and in appearance at least is very like the breccia of which Egyptian stone vases of the predynastic period are sometimes made. Indeed the stone of this object is quite possibly Egyptian, as that in Constantinople is said to be (see above, p. 46). Here again are the familiar features; the holes, in the usual arrangement, are surrounded by beautifully carved rosettes, greater or smaller for the two kinds of holes, the edges have the same mouldings, and on one side there are remains of a winged figure in relief, with upraised hand, following two attendants who were themselves at the end of a procession, apparently of the king's retinue. On the other side are remains of two human figures, one winged and holding a branch downwards. At the top, that is, on the flat end of the 'board', there were figures in the round, now quite broken off, but it is possible to see that there were two quadrupeds (according to the remains of one hoof, one at least was a bull) standing side by side. On the back is a slightly broken Assyrian inscription in four lines, parts of which reappear on other fragments to be enumerated, as also on the Constantinople fragment. To save repetition, the whole inscription, as made up in its entirety from various examples, may be given here:

ekal (m)aššur-aḥ-iddin šarru rabu šarru dan-nu šar kiššati šar (mat)aššuri
šakkanak babili(KI) šar (mat)šumeri u ak-ka-di-e
apal (m·ilu)sin-aḥe(MEŠ)-erib šarru dan-nu šar kiššati šar (mat)aššuri
apal (m)šarru-kin šarru dan-nu šar kiššati šar (mat)aššuri

'Palace of Esarhaddon, the great king, the mighty king, king of all, king of Assyria, governor of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, son of Sennacherib, the mighty king, king of all, king of Assyria, son of Sargon, the mighty king, &c.'

This object (No. 4) was found in Layard's excavations at Nimrud.

5. B.M. 12102 (Plate VII, *a*) is another large fragment, the flat end of another 'board' ($4\frac{3}{5} \times 3\frac{3}{8} \times 1\frac{3}{4}$ in. thick). The stone is a fine-grained marble-like substance of a purple colour. There are the usual flat and roll mouldings on the edges, this time without sculptured figures: it may be that the work was unfinished. The playing holes, though divided as usual into small and large, are all comparatively wide and shallow, and are evidently only the sockets which carried inlays of another material. At the flat end there are no traces of carved figures, but a line of four deep mortices, obviously to receive plugs by which an applied decoration was fixed on (as in the Constantinople fragment). There is no trace of an inscription on the back, which is perhaps another sign that it was unfinished.

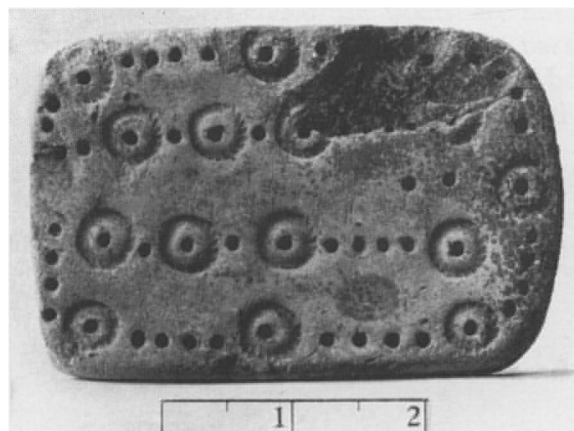
6. B.M. 91930+12104. Fragment ($3\frac{1}{2} \times 3 \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ in. thick) of the same material as No. 4 above. None of the upper side with the holes is preserved, only a trace of one moulded edge with a winged figure and the greater part of the Esarhaddon inscription on the back. On the flat end are the stumps of a pair of animal's feet, probably paws rather than hooves. It is likely that another fragment (12098) belongs to the same object and that it is, indeed, from the same corner, being separated only by a missing splinter. If this is so, then there stood on the end of this 'board' a large bovine figure, of which one of the hooves is seen on 12098, and in that case, the traces on 91930 are those of the feet of another smaller animal which stood beside or under the first, but faced the other direction. This juxtaposition of a large hoof and a smaller paw (facing the same way) is unmistakably shown in No. 7 (below), and similarly a larger and smaller pair of hooves (facing opposite ways) is found on No. 8. In the present instance it is even possible that there were two small figures under the larger; this is suggested by the position of the traces, but they are hardly sufficient to make the assertion positive. From Quyunjiq.

7. B.M. 81-7-27, 183 ($3\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ in. thick). Corner fragment in grey stone, with the characteristic mouldings and parts of figures on the edge, and the beginnings of the four lines of inscription on the back. The best feature is a large bovine hoof and part of the leg standing on the flat end. Just behind this can be seen the extremity of a paw with five toes of an animal, probably a lion, facing the same way as the hoof, but on a smaller scale. Another fragment (80-7-19, 329), measuring $2 \times 1\frac{1}{8}$ in., is almost certainly the other corner of this same 'board'. It bears a finely executed hind-hoof and again part of the leg, with a trace of the end of the first line in the inscription. Unfortunately it is too small to preserve traces of any smaller animal figure that may have existed. A third fragment (80-7-19, 327), $3 \times 1\frac{3}{4}$ in., actually joins on to the extreme tip of the preceding: it has some edge mouldings and the ends of the last three lines in the inscription. From Quyunjiq.

8. B.M. 81-2-4, 19 ($1\frac{7}{8} \times 1\frac{1}{2} \times 1\frac{5}{8}$ in.). Corner of a 'board' in grey stone, very smooth both on the worked surfaces and in the fracture. It has a few holes,



(a) 118768
UNFINISHED GAME-BOARD, FROM SIPPAR



(b) 123331
SMALL CLAY GAME-BOARD, FROM UR

with rosettes round some, in the normal arrangement. On the end are two large bovine hooves of the front legs, and behind those are two more, much smaller, and facing the opposite way. It seems evident that the group represented two creatures, one under the other, and possibly therefore a cow¹ and calf. With this fragment goes another, 81-2-4, 18 ($2\frac{1}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{2} \times 1\frac{3}{8}$ in.), though from a different part of the whole object. It has two rosetted holes and a deep hemispherical cavity on the face. On the edge is partly preserved a miniature relief of the king (?) shooting with the bow from his chariot at full gallop. From Quyunjiq.

In addition to these, there are two or three more fragments² which are of less importance. The most interesting is 83-1-18, 645, which is of a reddish conglomerate like Nos. 4 and 6, and measures $1\frac{1}{2} \times 1\frac{1}{16}$ in. It represents in its present state the rump and tops of the hind legs of a bull, such as must be assumed to have stood on the ends of the 'boards' described above. An unusual detail is that the animal was depicted with his tail boldly flourished over the back, and this feature was actually detached from the body by undercutting with a drill. At present all that can be seen is the hairy end lying over one side of the rump, and the broken stump of the tail.

9. The last object to be described is that shown on Plate VIII, *a*, measuring $8\frac{1}{2} \times 4 \times 1\frac{1}{4}$ in. thick (B.M. 118768). It was found at Abu Ḥabbah (Sippar), in spite of which the winged lion³ is evidently of Assyrian workmanship. Unlike the preceding, it is well preserved, and shows admirably the shape of the class of things now under consideration. But, despite the high finish of the winged lion, it is incomplete, for it has neither playing-holes, reliefs on the edge, nor inscription on the back. The material is a light-green marble. The lion seems to have been human-headed, with curled hair and beard. Though the head and the ends of the wings are gone, it is still an admirable piece of small carving, with all the Assyrian perfection of detail.

Between the Egyptian and the Asiatic (mainly Assyrian) specimens of these boards the most notable differences seem to be: (1) In Asia, there are not found the lines on the face connecting certain holes, though it may be supposed that the rules of the game, on which the use of these lines clearly depended, were the same in all countries. (2) In Egypt the ornamental (animal) groups standing on the flat end of the board are not found. But it is to be observed that certain of the Egyptian 'boards', in particular the finest of all—that found by Lord Carnarvon at Thebes—stand on bulls' legs. There is not, however, any necessary connexion between this and the ornamental

¹ It should, however, be noted that the fragment described in the next paragraph is plainly marked as a bull.

² In 1928-9 Dr. R. C. Thompson found another in the ruins of the temple of Nabu at Nineveh (*Archaeologia*, 79, pl. LVII, no. 338).

³ Although apparently bearded, it can best be compared with the 'sphinxes' at the entrance to the SW. Palace at Nimrud, illustrated in LAYARD, *Nineveh and its Remains*, 1 (3rd ed.), 349. These figures, it will be recalled, were also made by Esarhaddon.

Assyrian bulls, for furniture-legs of this shape were of course common in Egypt. The 'anthropoid' form is common to one Egyptian and the Palestinian example, while those from Susa also have the incurving flanks, and possibly in some cases a conventional indication of feet, so that they too are perhaps to be regarded as anthropoid. The Assyrian 'boards' are marked by a peculiar series of mouldings, flat and curved, on the edges close to the flat end, which might be a further conventionalization of the same form. The occurrence of a bull and a lion (?) together on No. 7 above might have suggested that the game in Assyria was Bulls and Lions,¹ were it not for the other examples (Nos. 6 and 8) which show that both animals might be bovines. The 'sphinx' of No. 9 is also against any such explanation.

In describing our No. 1 for the first time Essad Nassouhi had already observed that the inscription must belong to Esarhaddon, that the material was probably an Egyptian stone, and that this was naturally explained by the fact that Esarhaddon was the first Assyrian conqueror of Egypt. The additional evidence here presented proves, first, that the objects so inscribed were requisites of a game, which was played in Egypt at least as early as the Tenth to Twelfth Dynasties, and second, that these playthings were made at Nineveh for Esarhaddon in considerable numbers. Though there seems to be a very strange lack of local evidence for the survival of this game in seventh-century Egypt, it is difficult to resist the supposition that Esarhaddon came across it in Egypt and was so taken with it that he ordered his own craftsmen, *munammiru temu rubutišu*,² to make a number of these 'boards' for his amusement, using their own motives of decoration, but working often, it would seem, in Egyptian stone, probably for superstitious reasons connected with the good or bad luck involved in the issue of the game. So far as I know there is no evidence for the existence of this game in Babylonia or Assyria before his time, though the finds at Susa would suggest that it was in fact not unknown. Nor is there reason to think that it enjoyed any popularity afterwards: one of the examples from Ur might be of the Persian period, the other is quite uncertain, but it is by no means impossible that both should date from the Assyrian rule over that city. At all events, Esarhaddon must be regarded as at least the re-introducer of a game apparently Egyptian in origin, and the inspirer of what seems to have been a short-lived 'craze' arising out of a purely personal whim. Such a glimpse of the individual is a pleasing rarity in our view of the ancient world.

¹ As it was Hounds and Jackals in Egypt.

² S. SMITH, *First Campaign of Sennacherib*, I. 33.