

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*

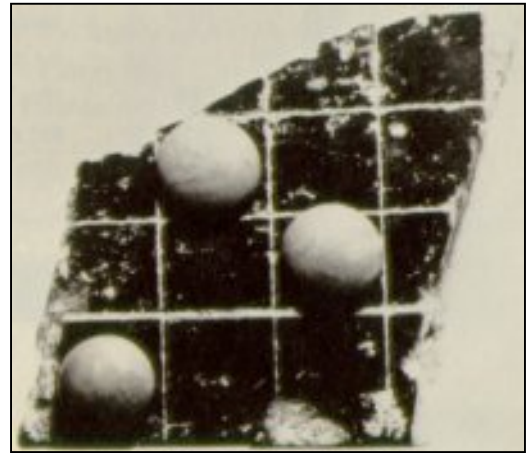
⁶ Plato, *RP 333b*

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 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. The method of capture in the games is the same, and the boards and pieces similar.



One key piece of additional evidence that can be gained from Latrunculi is board size, which varies. There is no standard, and dimensions vary among the surviving boards, and including rectangular boards. Another is that pieces move orthogonally, and may move backwards. The distance moved is not clear, but a remarkable archeological find of a latrunculi board with a game in progress in Stanway, England shown to the left reveal three key details not available in other evidence: "Black" played first and the basic pieces are moved two or one square in the first move.

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:

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

Some of these may be addressed in the context of the information available and the military culture of the Greek city-states.

The Stanway find clearly contradicts the supposition that pieces can initially be placed anywhere on the board in latrunculi. In addition, this is directly at odds with the nature of military formations used by the Greeks, and quite frankly almost every board game even vaguely similar to this one with the exception of Go. A scattering of pieces over the board would not only offend the eye, but also fly in the face of Aristotle's comments about the man alone. It is thus fairly reasonable to assume pieces are deployed in line along the back of the board.

Second, jumping other pieces does not seem reasonable in light of Plato's comments about a player's pieces being trapped by their opponent's.

The remaining three points require some discussion. There is no evidence of a backwards move, and Myron Samsin maps 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.¹⁰ This would tend to eliminate the possibility of a backwards move.

A lateral move for the "dux" piece in latrunculi clearly demonstrated in the Stanway find is not a strong argument for the same move for the dogs, which are found to have moved only forward.

Finally, the ability to move multiple squares in a move is again found with the "dux" piece in latrunculi, but the only evidence of it from Stanway is in a 2 square move of one of the black dogs. This is consistent with the two square initial move of the pawn, also found in the earliest versions of chess.¹¹

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 latrunculi. While there is no clear evidence, a reasonable assumption is that pieces would be deployed multiple rows deep on the board. This is consistent with the multiple ranked formations adopted by hoplites, and presents the additional tactical option of reserves.

However, none of these are concrete enough for certainty. In proceeding with a reconstruction assumptions will be made based on these points, but experimentation was required to determine how they impact the playability of the game. Experiments were initially done on a 12x8 square board with 12 dogs for each player. Playing the game and exploring the items in question above has proven fairly enlightening.

First, strictly starting with the pawn move revealed a fairly static game that quickly came to stalemate. The linear movement limited options, and rendered pieces on the edge columns "immune" to being taken. The play was far from being scientific, as described by Plato, and failed to excite much interest from the players. Thus, the pawn hypothesis does not seem to survive testing.

Extending play to allow pieces unlimited forward movement did not significantly change the outcome described above, only speeding the stalemate.

Next, lateral moves were added to the sequence of play. This proved to be a dramatic improvement of the play of the game, and players reported that this did improve both the complexity and enjoyment of play. It also resolved the problem of the "invulnerable" outermost file dogs, which would seem to indicate that this is essential to a reconstruction of the game.

After the introduction of the lateral move, the backward move was introduced. This was found to add some tactical options for play, but did not significantly change the play beyond allowing for more enjoyable play. Based on this, it is included in the reconstruction.

Having established a number of key play concepts with a single line of troops, the game was expanded to a 10x12 board with 30 dogs in three ranks for each player. It was expected that this would add to the tactical complexity of the game. However, it came as something of a surprise that while the addition did allow a player to recover from a mistake, it did not substantively change the play of the game.

¹⁰ Myron J Samsin, *Towards a Pre-History of Chess*, 2002

¹¹ above, and William Caxton, *The Game and Player of Chesse*, 1478

Through all of this, a recurring problem continued to dog efforts to reconstruct the game; play between even inexperienced players devolved into a stalemate far too quickly. This leaves two possibilities: Either this was a condition that existed in Poleis, or some element of play was missing. The first possibility will be ignored for now in the assumption that Plato's scientific game would not suffer such a problem, leaving the second point to be discussed.

Review of the reconstruction used in the early tests showed some flaws. The game board was based on the Stanway board and the play of *latrunculi*, which is substantively similar to *Shogo*, a Japanese children's game that suffers from a similar problem with stalemates. The introduction of the "Dux" piece in *latrunculi* is viewed as the addition which makes it a mature and playable game.¹²

Given this addition it is important to consider some assumptions that may have led to the problem. It was assumed that the sized of the *latrunculi* board would be reflective of the poleis boards. However, it is possible that the addition of the "Dux" piece changes the requirements driving board size. Second, this assumption drove the assumption that the relatively larger number of playing pieces in poleis would have been deployed in multiple ranks.

If both these assumptions are viewed as invalid, a new possibility exists; namely that the board in Poleis is substantively wider, and that pieces are deployed in a line at the rear. This wider frontage, coupled with the rook's move for the pieces, now presents a greater tactical challenge. It is easier to develop and exploit flanks due to the increased size of the board, and players now run the risk of being trapped just as Aristotle describes, a factor not found in play testing.

A further refinement that may change the play of the game would be to allow players to place their pieces in different rectangular formations several rows deep at the beginning of the game. If the 30 column wide board does not appear to resolve play problems, this alternative should be explored.

With what has been presented here, it is now reasonable to move on to a reconstruction of the game.

Reconstruction

The Board

Play may be made on a board whose dimensions are 30 columns wide by a differing number of rows deep (between 8 and 12 is suggested).

The Pieces

Players may choose to play with 30 pieces each.

Setup

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

¹² Need attribution.

Movement

Pieces may move orthogonally any number of squares. Pieces may not move into a square occupied by another piece, either their own or their opponents. They may safely move between two enemy pieces, including a move ending there.

Capturing Pieces

If, after a player has moved, he has one of his opponent's pieces between two of his own on adjacent squares, he removes his opponent's piece from play. A piece may contribute to the capture of more than one piece in the same 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

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.

