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Herding with the Hounds: The Game of Fifty-eight Holes in the Abşeron Peninsula

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The game of fifty-eight holes is one of the longest recognized games of antiquity, but also one of the least understood. New evidence from the Caspian littoral points to an early adoption of the game by Middle Bronze Age seasonally pastoral cattle herders in the late third millennium and early second millennium BC. *Six boards bearing this game's distinct pattern were found at sites on the Abşeron Peninsula and Gobustan Reserve in Azerbaijan. Their presence there not only indicates that the region was connected to societies to the south, but also demonstrates the game's popularity across cultures and socioeconomic groups. Its supposed first appearance in Egypt is questioned in favour of a south-western Asian origin.*

Keywords: fifty-eight holes, board games, Caucasus, Bronze Age, south-western Asia, long-distance interaction

Introduction

The game of fifty-eight holes (Petrie, 1927: 55), sometimes known as 'hounds and jackals' (so named because the first gaming pieces found feature either a jackal's or a hound's head; Carnarvon & Carter, 1912: 56–59), was played for more than a millennium from the Middle Bronze Age into the Iron Age. Its ancient name is lost, though Finkel (2020: 50–51) suggests that it could have been the *isb* from the Middle Kingdom Egyptian Tomb of Khety or the *patti-abzu* mentioned in a letter from Tushratta to Amenhotep III. Boards have been found in a broad region covering Egypt, the Levant, Mesopotamia, Iran, and Anatolia. Recently, patterns of shallow depressions identified on stone outcrops and portable stone objects indicate that this game was also played during that period in the southern Caucasus. Here we discuss these game boards to show that the Caspian coast was culturally connected to the wider region through playing this game. Our findings illuminate some questions concerning the game's origins and transmission throughout the wider region, and the societal context of game playing more broadly. Through this lens, we bring the archaeology of the Abşeron Peninsula into a broader regional context, highlighting connections between the Caucasus and cultures to the south.

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The game is played on a board whose playing spaces generally take the form of holes meant to receive peg-shaped pieces (Figure 1). Two parallel lines of ten holes form the centre of the board, with an arc of thirty-eight holes around them, making a total of fifty-eight holes. Frequently, specific holes are marked or connected to one another with a line. The shape of the boards is often cited as an important indicator of their regional and/or chronological origin: Type A, in the shape of an axe-blade or shield, is early and mostly found in Egypt; Type B, of 'violin' shape, is the most common type, being especially frequently found in Mesopotamia, the Levant, and Iran; Type C, taking the form of an 'oval platter', is the least common type (de Voogt et al., 2013: tab. 2).

Figure 1. *Game of fifty-eight holes board from Tomb 312 at el-Asasif, Egypt. Eleventh Dynasty (Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 26.3.154, Rogers Fund, 1926).* Image available under a CC0 licence.

Boards for the game of fifty-eight holes have been found throughout western Asia and Egypt (locations on Figure 2), first appearing at the beginning of the second millennium BC. The oldest dated example comes from a tomb at el-Asasif (MMA 509/TT 312; Winlock, 1928: 10; Dunn-Vaturi, 2019: 79–80), which probably belonged to one of the officials of the pharaoh Mentuhotep II (Allen, 1996: 20; Chudzik, 2015: 241), dating to 2064–1952 BC. This is based on Bayesian modelling of radiocarbon samples attributable to the reigns of individual pharaohs. The model takes into account reign lengths from the Egyptian textual sources, providing a date range (at 95 per cent probability) for the accession dates of Mentuhotep II (2064–2019 BC) and his successor, Amenemhat I (1998–1952 BC) (Bronk Ramsey et al., 2010: 1556). Another early example was found in Stratum II at Kültepe in central Anatolia, which according to the Mesopotamian Middle Chronology—the best-supported chronology according to ^{14}C and dendrochronological evidence (Manning et al., 2016)—dates from *c.* 1885 to 1836 BC (Manning et al., 2017: 75). Other boards are reported from Anatolia: four are known from Acemhöyük (Özguç, 1966: 46; Öztan, 1990: 250, 2005: 397; Dunn-Vaturi, 2012), another from Kültepe Stratum Ib (Özgüç, 1986: 81–83), and one from Karahöyük, contemporary with this stratum (Özgüç, 1986: 82).

Further early boards also exist in Egypt. One from a Middle Kingdom tomb at Sedment dates to the Ninth–Tenth Dynasty according to Petrie and Brunton (1924: 7–8), but Dunn-Vaturi (2019: 81) convincingly argues for a much later date; a Twelfth-Dynasty (Senusret II or later; 1890–1844 BC) example was found in the settlement of Lahun (Petrie, 1890: 30), and another from Carter Tomb 25 at el-Asasif (Carnarvon & Carter, 1912: 56–59) dating to a period not later than Amenemhat IV (1809–1744 BC; Miniaci & Quirke, 2008: 21). These dates,

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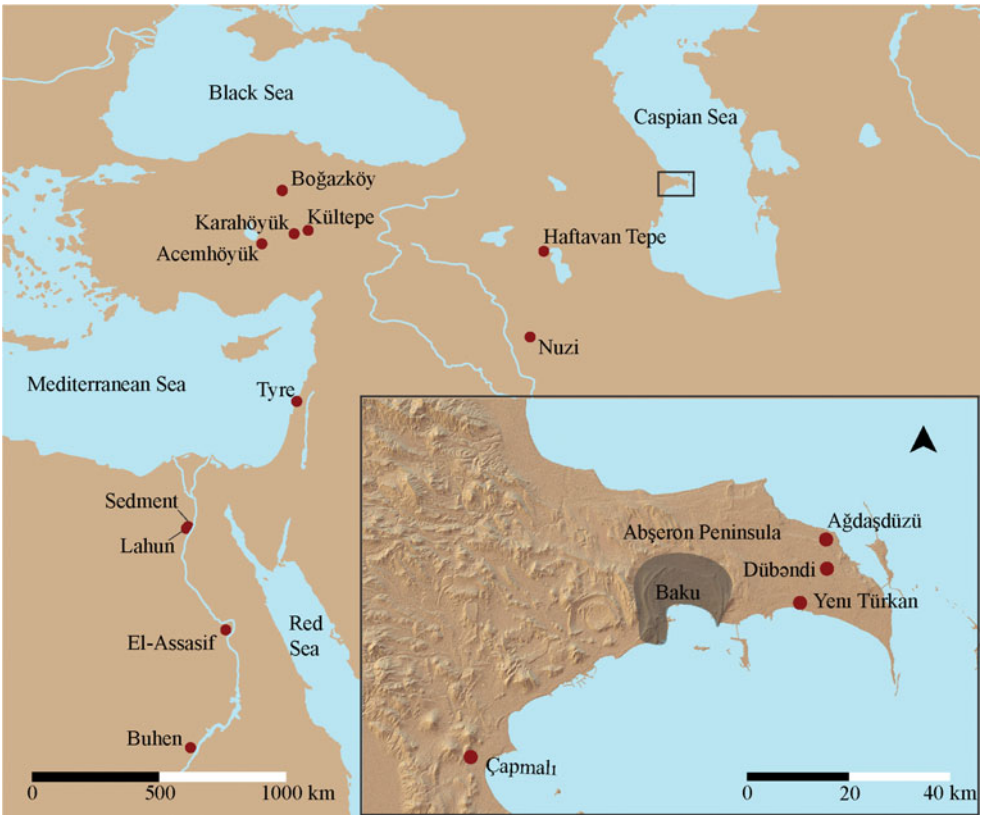

Figure 2. *Map of Middle Bronze Age sites where fifty-eight holes game boards were recovered.*

between the twenty-first and eighteenth centuries BC (though the Sedment board could be later), suggest that the game was widely played from very early in its existence. Other potentially early boards were found at Buhen in what is now Sudan's Northern State (Emery, 1979: 145–46), but their contexts cannot be dated precisely. Nevertheless, at least one of them is closer in form to Middle Kingdom boards than later exemplars (Crist et al., 2016: 115). A final fragmentary example was found at Nuzi in Mesopotamia and dated by the excavator to between 2170 and 1740 BC (Starr, 1937: pl. 117L; 1939: 520). The game is probably the intended subject of playing scenes in the late Eleventh- to early Twelfth-Dynasty tombs of Khety and Baqet III at Beni Hassan in Middle Egypt (Crist et al., 2016: 112–14; Kanawati & Evans, 2018: 45 pl. 87, 2020: 32, pls 32, 96).

Though the earliest possible date for these game boards is the Eleventh-Dynasty example from Egypt, the early popularity and longevity of the game of fifty-eight holes outside the Nile Valley may suggest that it was native to south-western Asia (Dunn-Vaturi, 2019: 85–86). Finkel (2020: 44) notes the early presence of the game in Egypt, favouring an origin there, but admits that this is not certain. Hoerth (2007: 64) also argues for an Egyptian origin, again based on the Egyptian examples having the earliest possible date.

Previous research on the game points to the longevity of the game of fifty-eight

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holes in the broader region (Hoerth, 2007; Crist et al., 2016: 101–24; Dunn-Vaturi, 2019; Finkel, 2020). In Egypt, there are only sporadic examples of this game after the Middle Kingdom, with none from a datable archaeological context (Petrie & Brunton, 1924: 7–8, pls 22.13, 25). Nevertheless, the game is depicted on the Twentieth-Dynasty (1313–1090 BC) Turin Papyrus 1775 (Decker & Herb, 1994: pl. 385). In south-western Asia, however, the game is quite frequently found through the mid-first millennium BC. Later, boards appear in Coptic Egypt with an analogous layout of holes, which some have argued shows the survival of the game of fifty-eight holes into late antiquity (Drioton, 1940: 184–86). Only one of these games has a documented archaeological context, dated to the seventh century AD (Crist et al., 2016: 122–24), representing a gap of up to a millennium after the latest documented example of a fifty-eight holes board (de Voogt et al., 2013: tab. 2).

While much attention has focused on the origin, typology, layout, and potential rules of the fifty-eight holes game and boards, less attention has been paid to the cultural processes that influence the transmission of games between regions. De Voogt et al. (2013) have examined that process in terms of changes in board morphology; this indicated that games change incrementally but with remarkable fidelity (i.e. most of the features shown on the board are transmitted) and do not seem to have been disseminated through conquest. This examination of the game did not include the boards from Azerbaijan. Presenting the latter here allows us to explore the findings of de Voogt and colleagues with respect to the transmission of the game to the Abşeron Peninsula. It also allows us to examine the kinds of interactions that brought the games to the coast of the Caspian Sea.

Games in the Abşeron Peninsula

The evidence from Azerbaijan shows that people played the game of fifty-eight holes there during the late third–early second millennium BC, and that they participated in regional interactions that ranged throughout south-western Asia. To date, six patterns with the distinctive geometry of the game have been identified on the Abşeron Peninsula and to the southwest of it, in the Gobustan National Reserve. One each was found at Çapmalı, Yenı Türkan, and Dübəndi, and three came from Ağdaşdüzü (Figure 2, inset).

Çapmalı

The game board with the best-recorded archaeological context comes from the Gobustan National Reserve, near the western shore of the Caspian Sea to the southwest of Baku. A covered shelter on the lower terrace of the Böyükdaş Mountain, between rocks 108, 109, 110, and 111, with petroglyphs from the Bronze Age and later periods, was recorded by Ishag Jafarzade as Shelter VII (Figure 3; Rustamov & Muradova, 1974: 10). Later, it was named Çapmalı (*çapma* in Azerbaijani means percussion on rock and is a word used locally for the abundant cupules in the Gobustan area).

Shelter VII is situated at the apex of a 100 × 200 m enclosed depression surrounded by rocks on all sides (Figure 4). The surface of this area is scattered with cultural remains and artefacts such as river stones and pottery fragments, mostly dating to the Middle Ages, but occasionally to the Bronze Age. Jafarzade documented many Bronze Age and medieval petroglyphs in this area (Jafarzade, 1973). Most of the images are of bezoar goats, typical of the Bronze Age (Farajova, 2018: 81; Sigari et al., 2019: 5), but images of

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Figure 3. *Aerial view of the Gobustan area. The rectangle indicates the location of the immediate vicinity of Çapmalı, shown in the inset.* © CNES/Airbus, Google Earth.

horses, bows, footprints, and cupules are also present.

Archaeological excavations in the Çapmalı camp were conducted outside the shelter in front of its northern entrance in 1972 and inside it in 1973 by Rustamov and Muradova (1972, 1973). Medieval structures and ceramics, as well as second-millennium BC material (Middle Bronze Age, Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age) were found in the Çapmalı shelter.

The first two strata show intensive use during the Middle Ages, while the third is devoid of cultural material. In the fourth

Figure 4. *View of Çapmalı, showing stone 111 in the centre, where the fifty-eight holes game was found.*

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stratum, the shelter was divided by a wall. This 0.9 m layer of greyish ashy soil contained a greater concentration of archaeological material than the others, with ceramics attributed to the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. This stratum can be divided into two substrata. The artefacts in the upper substratum are more numerous than in the lower, but all date to the second millennium BC, with the assemblages of both substrata being similar in type, composition, and shape. They include various pottery sherds, obsidian, flint fragments, broken river stones, and grinding stones. Rustamov and Muradova classified the pottery in this layer into two categories. A grey, wheel-thrown type of finer fabric, which is often decorated, is comparable to that known from the Khojaly-Gadabay culture (thirteenth–seventh century BC). An underfired, rougher type with brittle yellow and pink fabric mixed with powdered limestone and plastered with liquid clay echoes Middle Bronze Age types. This type exhibits yellow and pink spots, and discernible black streaks in the sherds' section resulting from insufficient firing. Most of these sherds have embossed geometric patterns on the shoulder. A small quantity of pottery reminiscent of clay lamps known in antiquity (500 BC–AD 300) was also recovered. The Çapmalı shelter is interpreted as a settlement occupied during the Middle Bronze Age, Late Bronze–Early Iron Age, antiquity, and the Middle Ages (Rustamov & Muradova, 1973: 9), probably as a shelter used by seasonal cattle herders during the winter, as still practised locally.

The game of fifty-eight holes consists of a pattern pecked into a stone (stone 111) located in front of the shelter's southern entrance (Figure 5). It was discovered by chance in 2015, beneath a layer of earth covering stone 111. The narrow

Figure 5. *Orthophotograph of Çapmalı, view toward the south. The arrow indicates the location of the fifty-eight holes game.* Reproduced by permission of Elgun Pirverdiyev.

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space between stones 108 and 111 on the shelter's south-eastern side had long been enclosed with stones and covered with earth. This space is covered with unhewn stones that make up a height of more than 2 m measured from the inside. According to the shelter's investigators, 'There is no doubt that the wall is ancient. Because this wall is filled with soil from the shelter's outer side, it is difficult to detect' (Rustamov & Muradova, 1973: 5). It is likely that these stones were sandwiched between stones 108 and 111 and covered with soil during the first period of use of the shelter, in the Middle Bronze Age, to improve the living environment inside the shelter; indeed, the semi-desert conditions of Gobustan, especially the strong northerly winds and dust brought by the wind and the rainwater flowing through the rocks, make it an unhospitable environment. This soil, which also covered the stone with the game pattern, is only 0.5 m away from the stones that block the space between the stones 108 and 111. After the rocks were covered with soil, it would be difficult or impossible to carve a pattern of holes in that location. Taking these factors into account, the game pattern on stone 111 can be associated with the shelter's earliest, Middle Bronze Age, layer.

Rendered as a series of shallow depressions, with narrow channels connecting certain holes, the pattern closely resembles boards found in south-western Asia and Egypt (Figure 6). The holes and lines are pecked into the stone surface, as are all the boards discussed here. In the centre are two parallel lines of eleven cupules roughly 12–14 mm in diameter (Figure 7). The uppermost cupule in each line is slightly larger than the others (21 mm (right) and 19 mm (left)), and the second from the top in the right-hand row is also larger (20 mm). A channel connects the seventh cupules in each line, as does another connecting the ninth cupules (the numbering

Figure 6. *The fifty-eight holes board from Çapmalı.*

of the cupules and holes follows the convention given in Carnarvon & Carter (1912: 57) which proposes separate tracks for each player). Around this is an arc of thirty-four cupules. The twentieth cupule, at the apex, is larger than the others (25 mm). Curved channels connect the fifth cupule to the tenth, and the tenth to the fifteenth on the left side of the arc. This is mirrored on the right side, though the fifth cupule on the right is damaged, and the bottom portion of the arc is no longer extant. Assuming the right side of the arc was originally symmetrical, four cupules are missing. In addition, there is a larger, probably extraneous, depression to the left of the left-hand row of holes, and a zig-zag channel. While similar lines do not appear on other known game boards, the position and shape of this channel evokes the shape of another board, now in

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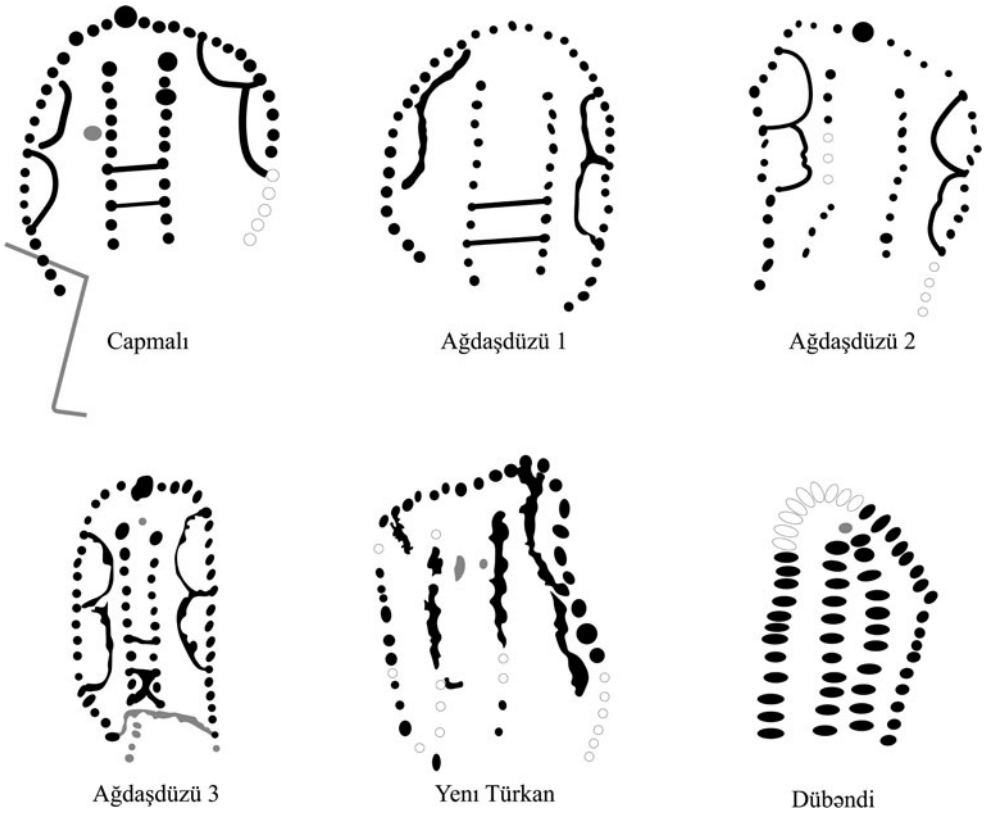

Figure 7. *Drawing of fifty-eight holes boards from the Abşeron Peninsula and Gobustan. Grey indicates cupules or lines which may be part of the game pattern, dotted lines indicate features which would have existed in damaged parts of the stones. Drawings of Ağdaşdüzü 3 after Aliyev and Abdullayev (2011: fig. 55), of Yenı Türkan from a photograph by Ronnie Gallagher, and of Dübəndi after Aliyev and Aslanov (1988: pl. 15). Drawings not to scale.*

the British Museum (2003, 1201.1; Finkel, 2020: 46–47).

Ağdaşdüzü

Three boards were found at Ağdaşdüzü, a second-millennium BC site in the Abşeron Peninsula (Figure 8; Aliyev & Abdullayev, 2011: 67, 123, fig. 55) located 1 km south of the Mardakan railway station. Large stone slabs, some with petroglyphs, surround the settlement. Ceramic models of wheels, cylindrical stands, flat braziers with straight walls, and butter churn fragments have been recovered from this site (Aliyev, 1993: 62–70). The layout of the settlement, which consists of stone structures enclosed by a large stone fence, is characteristic of the period (Aliyev & Abdullayev, 2011: 16–17).

Two examples of the game were recorded by Abbas Islamov and Ronnie Gallagher on a large stone in the centre of the settlement (Figure 9). The site has since been built over in the urban development of the Abşeron Peninsula, but the stone itself was moved to the Gala Museum. Settlements dating to the late third to early second millennium BC consist of large or small buildings surrounded by large upright stones, often

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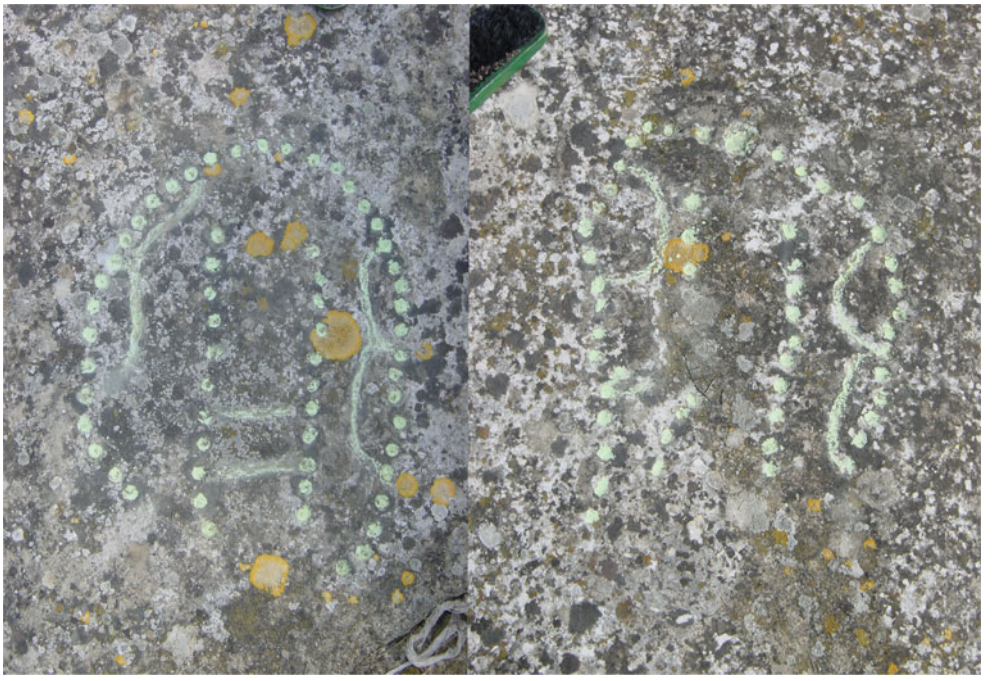

Figure 8. *Two fifty-eight holes boards from Ağdaşdüzü found in the centre of the settlement.* Reproduced by permission of Ronnie Gallagher.

with petroglyphs on those stones or on the bedrock itself (Achundov & Narimanov, 1996: 46–49), as is the case of our game patterns. The location of two games near the settlement's centre suggests that people gathered there to play.

The games were located roughly 1.5 m apart. One of the patterns is nearly identical to the array found at Çapmalı (see Figure 7), but the two holes at the top of the central parallel lines are not larger than the others. The second pattern is not as well preserved but follows a similar layout. Ten cupules are preserved in the right-hand parallel row, without connecting channels. Seven survive in the left-hand row. The outer arc is nearly complete, except for the lower four holes on the right-hand side.

A third example, with an unreported find location, also exhibits the same basic pattern of cupules (Aliyev & Abdullayev, 2011: pl. 55; see Figure 7). However, in both rows there appear to be curved lines connecting the ninth depression with the eleventh in its row, such that the lines touch one another. It is possible that one of these is extraneous. There are five or six depressions on the left-hand side, and one on the right, below the pattern, which has been cut off from the rest by an unevenly curved line, perhaps to demarcate the gaming pattern and avoid confusion. This line, like that on the Çapmalı board, demarcates the entire array of impressions known from other games, such as that from Kültepe (Özgüç, 1986: pl. 132.9).

Yeni Türkan

A fifth instance of a game of fifty-eight holes was discovered in the 'Kurgan desert' in the south-eastern Abşeron Peninsula. The Kurgan desert is connected to the settlement of Yeni Türkan, situated between the modern villages of Türkan and

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Figure 9. *Abbas Islamov and Ronnie Gallagher indicating the location of the two Ağdaşdüzü boards in the centre of the settlement.* Reproduced by permission of Ronnie Gallagher.

Hövsan. Kurgan 40, which had a diameter of 22 m, was excavated in 2004. The mound is dated from the second half of the third millennium BC to the middle of the second millennium BC, based on the ochre-coloured, polished, relatively well-fired ceramics and other finds it contained (Aliyev, 2005b: 110). Ceramics exhibiting similar characteristics were also recovered from Kurgan 5 at Dübəndi (Aliyev & Aslanov, 1988: 8–9; see below). Black polished ceramics adorned with a hanging triangle motif were discovered in Yeni Türkan's adjacent Kurgan 41, which yielded the same cultural assemblage. Instances of such ceramics have been documented in sites associated with the Uzarliktepe culture, which flourished during the Middle Bronze Age (Aliyev, 2005b: 109). A 2 × 3 m rectangular stone structure in the south-western sector of the kurgan's stone platform consisted of large pieces of rock. Based on ceramic fragments, animal bones, hearth, and ash remains, Idris Aliyev interpreted this structure as an altar. This is where the game, as well as a schematic image of a goat, was discovered (Aliyev, 2005b: 108–09).

The game board is less well preserved than our other examples. The roughly rectangular stone is irregularly shaped around the edges, with the outer arc of depressions following these edges. The two parallel lines in the centre are visible but are much eroded or worn, such that they form a single channel, making it difficult to distinguish them (see Figure 7). On the outer arc, six holes are missing from the bottom of the right-hand side because the stone is damaged, and the left-hand side of the arc is very worn. The apex and top holes of the parallel lines are not enlarged; lines connecting holes in the

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outer arc are visible on the right, with possible traces on the left. The remnants of one line may have connected cupules in the inner rows. The degree and type of wear on this stone is reminiscent of that seen on other limestone games in Bronze Age Cyprus (Crist, 2021: 81–83), suggesting that it was used many times for play before it was deposited in the kurgan.

Dübəndi

A final instance of the game, on a moveable stone plaque measuring 360 × 300 × 60 mm, was found in Kurgan 5 at Dübəndi (Aliyev & Aslanov, 1988). The board was found incorporated into the eastern side of the kurgan's stone platform, which was covered with sand (Figure 10). Its use as a game must therefore predate the construction of the kurgan. It was more crudely made than our other examples, and the apex and part of the left half of the arc of cupules are obscured by surface damage. Nevertheless, twenty-nine holes in the outer arc remain (see Figure 7). The cupules are oval (*c.* 35 × 16 mm), unlike the more circular holes on the other stones. There are no connecting lines or enlarged holes. An extra depression is centred above the parallel lines, also seen on the third example from Ağdaşdüzü. The excavators assign Kurgan 5 to the earlier part of the Middle Bronze Age, specifically the end of the third millennium to the beginning of the second millennium BC, based on the kurgan type and red wares found within such mounds (Aliyev & Aslanov, 1988: 11–12).

The Game of Fifty-Eight Holes in the Middle Bronze Age World

These examples of the game of fifty-eight holes add to earlier findings and suggest a reorientation of our thinking about this game as a tool for interpreting the sites on which they are found. Clearly the gaming cultures which spanned north-eastern Africa and western Asia during the Middle Bronze Age included the Caucasus region. Following the model of cultural transmission of games in the region put forward by de Voogt et al. (2013), contextualizing these games within the networks that existed between Azerbaijan and the broader region offers explanations for how the games played on the Caspian coast relate to those found elsewhere. They also provide important indications regarding the dating of certain board types. To understand the mechanisms that brought the game to the Abşeron Peninsula, we shall first consider the evidence for interaction between the semi-nomadic peoples living on the shores of the Caspian Sea and the cultures to the south and west.

Connections with Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Iran

Much has been written about the connections between the Caucasus region and Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and the Levant, particularly with respect to the Maikop and Kura-Araxes cultures of the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age (see Sagona, 2018: 132–280 for a discussion of these periods and broader connections). The Middle Bronze Age in the Caucasus is not as well understood, largely due to the transition from a sedentary lifestyle to one characterized by mobile subsistence strategies leading to a decrease in settlements. Thus, archaeological evidence for the Middle Bronze Age mostly comes from tombs, which generally took the form of kurgans, some of which attest to considerable wealth and a socially stratified society.

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Figure 10. *Plan of Kurgan 5 at Dübəndi, with the location of the fifty-eight holes board indicated by an arrow at the bottom (after Aliyev & Aslanov, 1988: pl. 3). Reproduced by permission of Idris Aliyev.*

Such is the case for the Abşeron Peninsula and the Gobustan Reserve. On the Abşeron Peninsula, a regional style of kurgans exists, as well as evidence of seasonal settlements (Achundov & Narimanov, 1996: 46–49; Bertram, 2003: 86–87; Sagona, 2018: 371–72). Rock art was also a prevalent feature of the Middle Bronze Age in the peninsula, and its thematic similarities to Mesopotamian art point to cultural connections with the wider region in which the game of fifty-eight holes was played (Aliyev, 2005a). At Gobustan, some of the Bronze Age artefacts are similar to those found at sites in south-western Asia (Muradova, 2011: 109), and some Middle Bronze Age petroglyphs also reflect motifs of Mesopotamian mythology (Abdullayev, 2018: 763).

Middle Bronze Age connections to other cultures of south-western Asia are well-attested in other parts of the

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Caucasus. Recent work has shown that the Caucasus region was included in a network of connections that facilitated exchange—in part, due to the seasonal movement of pastoralists—in Anatolia, Iran, and further south (Rova, 2020: 12–16). Even though the Middle Bronze Age saw a transition from the sedentary lifestyle of the Kura-Araxes culture to a more mobile, pastoral mode of subsistence, the successor cultures of the region remained in contact with the wider south-western Asian world. Beginning in the second half of the third millennium BC, the presence of tin bronzes, amongst which several examples were found in Gobustan, points to exchange with Mesopotamian trade networks that acquired tin from Iran, Anatolia, and Afghanistan (Hasanova, 2016: 222–25).

Further to the west, in Georgia and part of Armenia, the Trialeti culture is noted for its jewellery and other precious metalwork with close parallels to Mesopotamia, Syria, and even Egypt. Silver goblets bear artistic motifs that 'derive directly from the glyptic tradition of the Old Assyrian colony period, as reflected on the seal impressions from Kültepe Kanesh' (Sagona, 2018: 348; Rubinson, 2003). Basket-handled metal vessels from Trialeti also point to connections with Kültepe Kanesh, where the greatest number of vessels with this distinct handle have been found (Rubinson, 2001). Goldwork also connects the Trialeti culture with the south, including jewellery, cups, and weapons, with clear Mesopotamian inspiration, as well as a leg-shaped agate amulet of a type popular in Egypt from the Sixth Dynasty until the First Intermediate Period (Abramishvili, 2010: 169–71).

Blue faience beads originating in Egypt and Mesopotamia also indicate Middle Bronze Age relations with south-western Asia. Turquoise faience beads found in Kültepe II, Qizilburun, Shahtakht, Chalkhangala, and Galajik (all in western Azerbaijan) indicate that this type of item was present there in the first half of the second millennium BC (Bakhshaliyev, 2007: 179). Turquoise glazed faience beads were also discovered in large quantities in the Middle Bronze Age monuments of Gobustan and Abşeron, including at Ağdaşdüzü, Dübəndi, and Türkan (Aliyev, 1993; Muradova, 2011: 83).

Cultural transmission of games from Anatolia to the Caspian coast

The Abşeron Peninsula's connection to exchange networks suggests that the game of fifty-eight holes spread through trade rather than conquest (de Voogt et al., 2013: 1728). Moreover, it appears to have been transmitted with fewer innovations (i.e. changes to the board) than the game of twenty squares over the course of its existence (de Voogt et al., 2013: 1727–28). The boards from Azerbaijan do, however, show innovations that have not been observed previously, which may be relevant since these boards lie at the beginning of the history of the game of fifty-eight holes. De Voogt et al. (2013: 1727) noted that their sample of fifty-eight holes boards was skewed toward later periods, and that more early examples were needed.

The boards from the Abşeron Peninsula are the only known examples that were made on locally available limestone. Moreover, they were made in such a way that they are unlikely to have been imported: they are the only known immobile versions of the game of fifty-eight holes, thus unequivocally made where they were found. Portable game boards found in other regions, especially those made of precious materials, could have been imported, thus complicating our ability to track innovations in board layout on a case-by-case basis. Comparing our boards

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to those found elsewhere can therefore provide indications about how the game reached the region, and how it changed as a result of cultural interactions.

While the boards from the Caucasus have no exact parallels with any other known boards used for the game of fifty-eight holes, they all have features that exist in at least one of the others. An example from Kültepe in central Anatolia (Özgüç, 1986: pl. 132.9; Dunn-Vaturi, 2019: fig. 10) most closely resembles our boards. It contains the two distinct holes at the top of the two parallel lines in the centre of the board (Özgüç, 1986; Gülalp, 2008, pl. 20b) as well as the lines in the outer arc and a larger hole at the apex. It has a total of sixty-one holes. This board is dated to between 1950 and 1835 BC by Finkel (2020: 46), while Manning et al. (2017: 75) date Kültepe's Stratum II, where the board was found, to 1885–1836 BC. Regardless, it is one of the earliest boards known. The fact that the examples from Azerbaijan most closely resemble the board from Kültepe is not surprising considering the amount of material from Trialeti—particularly with regard to metal objects—that also indicates connections with Kültepe.

A second example from Kültepe is morphologically different and is slightly later, dating to *c.* 1800–1700 BC. The board itself has the shape of an arrowhead, with holes six, eight, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, and the apex outlined in lead. Another example from Karahöyük is nearly identical, and has the same date (Gülalp, 2008: 46, 48, pls 19b, 20a). Contemporary examples from Acemhöyük are fragmentary, one showing a portion of the outer arc of holes with a curved line consistent with those that connect holes fifteen to twenty or twenty to twenty-five (Öztan, 2005: 397, pl. 6a). Yet another example of this arrowhead-shaped type of board was found at Boğazköy and dated to the Hittite period (Bittel, 1937: 22); since its archaeological context was not recorded, it may belong to the same period as the other Anatolian boards (Gülalp, 2008: 54; Anne Dunn-Vaturi, pers. comm). Another object that seems to be a fifty-eight holes board was found at Haftavan Tepe in Iranian Azerbaijan (Edwards, 1983: fig. 146.s), in Early Stratum VIB, broadly dated to *c.* 1900–1550 BC (Edwards, 1986: 70). It is a copper fragment, with depressions arrayed in the remnants of a pattern of two parallel lines surrounded by an arc. Six remain in the left-hand line, four or five in the right-hand line, and seven in the outer arc. There is no indication of lines connecting the holes. In this respect, let us note that only one of the boards from Azerbaijan (that from Kurgan 5 at Dübəndi) is without lines connecting holes.

Boards classified by Finkel (2020) as a 'crossover' type, which include those from Azerbaijan and Kültepe, indicate a kind of gameplay that differs from that shown on the early Egyptian boards with two parallel tracks. Because of the regularity in some of the lines—such as those that connect the holes in the outer arc, which always connect the same holes—it is likely that these share some common origin. Innovations appear in some of the boards' appearance: whether the apex of the arc is accentuated, whether there are 'starting holes' or any other lines connecting holes, and whether they cross between the left and right side of the board. It may be possible to trace a sequence of innovations from the Kültepe board to the Ağdaşdüzü board (Ağdaşdüzü 3 in Figure 7), which adds two crossover lines to the board, to the other examples from Azerbaijan that eliminate some of the crossover lines. This sequence of a single change from board to board could indicate a process of cultural transmission, as the game was adopted into the society living on the Caspian coast. More finely grained dating of these

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sites than is currently possible would be necessary to confirm this, but conceptually the process is more visible here than, for example, between Anatolia and Egypt.

In Egypt, there are never crossover lines on fifty-eight holes boards. While the south-western Asian boards exhibit a considerable degree of variability, the Egyptian examples are remarkably regular in design (see Figure 1), with lines connecting the eighth and tenth holes in the inner rows, the sixth hole in each inner row to the twentieth in the outer arc on each side, and the fifteenth and twenty-fifth holes marked with the hieroglyph *nfr* ('good'). This Egyptian pattern is never exactly replicated in south-western Asia. Here, where it can be determined, boards with lines connecting holes always display a crossover pattern. It is not easy to hypothesize a sequence of transmission and innovation for the Egyptian board type, since there are several differences between the Egyptian games and the Anatolian ones, without morphological intermediates in the Levant. A board dated to the Middle Bronze Age is said to have been found at Tyre (Dunn-Vaturi, 2019: 83). It is a flat slab of limestone, without lines or marked holes, except for the apex and two 'starting holes' that are larger than the others. There is also a single small hole at the bottom of the board, but it is unclear whether it is meant to be used for play. It is the only known contemporary example which is purportedly from the Levant. Lebanon or Syria would be expected to be the connection between Egypt and Anatolia (Dunn-Vaturi, 2019: 83), but this board is several innovations away from either the Egyptian or the Anatolian boards.

Finkel (2020: 53–55) suggests that the development of the crossover board configuration is an adaptation of the game of fifty-eight holes to make it more interesting than the Egyptian version by imposing increased interaction between each player's pieces. This is based on the possibility that the games from Azerbaijan could date to the late second or first millennia BC, but this is not supported by the archaeological evidence from Çapmalı, Dübəndi, Yeni Türkan, and indeed Kültepe, which clearly demonstrate that the crossover game was played during the Middle Bronze Age. The more complex board from Tepe Sialk in central Iran, which dates from the eleventh to ninth century BC and features a more elaborate pattern of crossover lines (Ghirshman, 1939: 44), may indicate such a development toward more complex rules, but it is clear that crossover boards existed in the early history of the game of fifty-eight holes.

The Origin of the Game of Fifty-Eight Holes

The game of fifty-eight holes was played in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Iran, and the Caucasus during the late third–early second millennium BC. While all these regions have boards without lines connecting holes, those with lines show that there are regional differences in the arrangement of these lines. In Egypt, the lines only connect holes in the same track, while in Anatolia, Iran, and Azerbaijan the lines connect holes in different tracks. While these indicate differences in the rules of gameplay between these places (as discussed in Finkel, 2020: 52–53), the wide distribution of the boards indicates a shared practice. Local variations in traditional games are not unusual, as rules are passed orally from person to person, resulting in modifications to the game through cultural transmission processes (de Voogt et al., 2013). While a variety of types are known in Middle Bronze Age Anatolia—crossover boards, boards with only marked holes, axe blade-, violin, and arrowhead-shaped boards—only one board type, the axe-blade type with lines that do

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not crossover, is present in Egypt during the Middle Bronze Age.

It is possible, given the present evidence from Anatolia and the Caucasus, that this game may not have originated in Egypt after all. This has been suggested in the past (Dunn-Vaturi, 2019: 86), but now there is more evidence for the early popularity of this game far from Egypt. The diversity of the fifty-eight holes board in south-western Asia—as well as its early appearance and longevity there—offers a stronger case for an origin further north than Egypt. The argument for an Egyptian origin lies in the early date for the board from el-Asasif, dating to the reign of Mentuhotep II who reigned for fifty-one years sometime between 2064–1952 BC, as the earliest example of the game. However, the earliest possible date for the game comes from the example found at Nuzi (Starr, 1937: pl. 117L, 1939: 520). Stratum V/VI, where the game was found, has recently been attributed to the Ur III (Neo-Sumerian) period (Novák, 2007: 392). Absolute dating for this period is complex, but the Middle Chronology—which is supported by Anatolian and Egyptian radiocarbon and dendrochronological results—for Ur III is 2102–1995 BC (D'Andrea, 2016: 218–20). Only a small fragment of this board survived, but this places the Nuzi object before the earliest Egyptian board. Clearly, further early evidence for the game from precisely dated contexts is required to credit a specific culture for inventing this game.

Whatever the origin of the game of fifty-eight holes, it was quickly adopted and played by a wide variety of people, from the nobility of Middle Kingdom Egypt to the cattle herders of the Caucasus, and from the Old Assyrian traders in Anatolia to the workers who built Middle Kingdom pyramids. The fast spread of this game attests to the ability of games to act as social lubricants (Crist et al., 2016), facilitating interactions across social boundaries. Games are particularly amenable to building relationships between traders because games are one way that people use to judge trustworthiness, informing future social and economic relationships (Malaby, 2007: 107). At certain times in antiquity, particular games were regionally popular, suggesting that they helped to connect cultures that regularly interacted with one another, as has been documented in more recent times (Townshend, 1979: 796). The game of fifty-eight holes probably served this purpose in the second millennium BC in Egypt and south-western Asia, because it was the only game that was played throughout the region. Indeed, the game was particularly embedded into the social lives of people living in towns involved in the Old Assyrian *karum* system (Highcock & Heffron, 2023), of which all of the Anatolian sites producing Middle Bronze Age games were a part. Other games were only locally popular.

Because the nature of these games is so ephemeral, it is likely that many have been overlooked in the archaeological record. It is notable that in Bronze Age Cyprus, where games were similarly made of cupules on rough limestone blocks, all the examples that have been found have come to light since the first example was published in 1976. Were they truly never found before then? Were they overlooked as unimportant or unidentified during excavations because the patterns are so difficult to discern? Perhaps in the future more game boards will be found in the Caucasus to add further clarity to the ludic history of the region.

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Le jeu des cinquante-huit trous sur la péninsule d'Abşeron en Azerbaïdjan

Le jeu des cinquante-huit trous est un jeu ancien connu depuis fort longtemps mais aussi un des moins compris. De nouvelles données provenant du littoral de la Mer Caspienne indiquent que ce jeu aurait été adopté tôt par des communautés mobiles d'éleveurs de bovins à l'âge du Bronze, à la fin du troisième et au début du second millénaire av. J.-C. Six plateaux de jeu exhibant les éléments caractéristiques de ce jeu ont été découverts sur la péninsule d'Abşeron et la Réserve de Gobustan en Azerbaïdjan. Leur présence indique que la région entretenait des liens avec les sociétés situées plus au sud mais aussi que ce jeu était prisé dans divers milieux culturels et socioéconomiques. Les auteurs remettent en question l'origine présumée du jeu des cinquante-huit trous en Egypte en faveur d'une genèse en Asie du Sud-Ouest. Translation by Madeleine Hummler

Mots-clés: jeu des cinquante-huit trous, jeu de société, Caucase, âge du Bronze, Asie du Sud-Ouest, interaction à longue distance

Das Spiel der achtundfünfzig Löcher auf der Abşeron Halbinsel in Aserbaidschan

Das Spiel der achtundfünfzig Löcher ist seit langem bekannt, aber dieses alte Spiel ist auch sehr wenig verstanden. Neue Angaben aus dem Kaspischen Küstenbereich weisen darauf hin, dass dieses Spiel von wandernden Viehzüchtern früh angenommen wurde, in der Mittelbronzezeit, d. h. im späten dritten Jahrtausend oder am Anfang des zweiten Jahrtausends v. Chr. Sechs Spielbretter mit den charakteristischen Merkmalen des Spieles wurden auf der Abşeron Halbinsel und in der Gobustan Reserve in Aserbaidschan entdeckt. Sie zeigen, dass die Gegend mit weiter südlich gelegenen Gesellschaften in Zusammenhang waren und dass das Spiel von verschiedenen sozioökonomischen und kulturellen Gemeinschaften beliebt war. Die vermutete Herkunft des Spieles in Ägypten wird infrage gestellt, und einen Ursprung in Südwestasien wird vorgeschlagen. Translation by Madeleine Hummler

Stichworte: Spiel der achtundfünfzig Löcher, Brettspiele, Kaukasus, Bronzezeit, Südwestasien, ferne Wechselbeziehungen

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