

# EPHEMERIS NAPOCENSIS

XXXII  
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# EPHEMERIS NAPOCENSIS

XXXII

2022

**ROMANIAN ACADEMY**  
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At first glance, war and game seem to be two contrasting analytical categories, but past and present reality point to a variety of connections, some of them rather unexpected. Battle tactics are taught and practised using complex war games and many would-be soldiers first learn how to fight using dummy weapons of all sorts. On the other hand, boys played with toy weapons throughout history and many games across the world involve tactics, strategies and, above all, competitiveness, that is the inextricable will to win. However, the topic in question is less common outside the fields of cultural anthropology or sociology<sup>1</sup>, and there are not many historical or archaeological studies dealing with its different aspects<sup>2</sup>, besides those discussing various types of board games and their occasional presence in male burials which also contain weapons or in Roman military contexts.<sup>3</sup>

This new book, which aims to fill the aforementioned knowledge gap, contains eleven contributions presented during the International Conference *Warriors at Play. Otium, learning and isonomy*, which was organized online on 28 May 2021 by the Elche Archaeological and History Museum “Alejandro Ramos Folqués”, to accompany the exhibition *El guerrero ibero y el juego. Estrategia, azary estatus* (p. 12–13). Two research projects (one funded by the ERC) provided the initial research frameworks within which these activities have taken place (p. 14).

As stated in the *Introduction* (p. 9–14), the book is structured in three parts, the first including just one article that takes into consideration the childhood sphere, the second including two articles which are exclusively dealing with the literary evidence, while the remaining articles were grouped in the third part based on their focus on archaeological evidence. The articles are written in four different languages (English, French, Spanish, and Italian), which is a bit unusual. The editors chose to include contributions that focus on a particular sub-theme of the *bellum et ludus* topic – the games in which groups of peers were engaged to test their abilities within a well-regulated context, though this could be sometimes less obvious when reading some of the articles. The selected case-studies cover a wider temporal and cultural space, from the Archaic to the Roman Imperial period and from Greece to Britain, and take into consideration a variety of literary, iconographic and archaeological evidence.

There is just one study that deals with the children's martial games, *Children at war, war in play*, which is authored by Véronique Dasen, a well-known specialist in the history and archaeology of childhood (p. 15–28). Her investigation starts from the obvious but seldom discussed observation that war was a fact of life in ancient Greece and Rome, so children were routinely exposed to its multiple forms of manifestation. Several aspects are examined, based on both literary and archaeological evidence, from children's direct contact with military life to their involvement in martial role-playing to the use of board games as tools for boys' civic

<sup>1</sup> E.g., HUIZINGA 1998; CAILLOIS 2001; VAN CREVELD 2013; PÖTZSCH/HAMMOND 2016.

<sup>2</sup> E.G., CORNELL 2002; DASEN 2015.

<sup>3</sup> E.G., CARRETERO VAQUERO 1998; PACE 2015; DUGGAN 2015.

education. Dasen is convincingly arguing that many toys were not only meant to amuse the children, but to also familiarize them with their future adulthood duties.

The following contribution, *Heroes at the board game: the literary tradition of the pictorial motif of Ajax and Achilles playing a board game*, by Lucía P. Romero Mariscal (p. 28–37), focuses on a well-known image of two fully armed warriors deeply concentrated on a board game, which already sparked many debates about its meaning. The image appears on many Attic painted vessels of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC and is considered to represent Ajax and Achilles. It was variously interpreted as a scene of ritual divination or one that alludes to the daily life in the Greek camp during the siege of Troy, or as a mythical allegory of either the peril of ignoring tyranny for futile pleasure or, on the contrary, of the male warlike aristocratic excellence. However, starting from the diachronic analysis of all iconographic variants and a clever use of the entire Trojan epic cycle, the author offers a new way of understanding the recurring motif of the “heroes playing a board game” and its ever-changing meanings in the eyes of both the artisans and the consumers.

Marco Vespa's *Funny games. The power of play in taming humans (Xenophon's Cyropaedia II, 3, 17–20)* explores the ancient perception of the educative role of structured play based on the example of a war game supposedly designed by Cyrus to train his army while maintaining the soldiers' obedience, trust and solidarity (p. 39–58). The author argues that this kind of highly staged game was also meant to exploit the inherent competitive pleasure experienced by the participants as a way of strengthening their combativeness. The story goes along the opinions of other Greek authors, for example Plato, who considered that the mimetic role-play generally allowed the children to experience reality while also harnessing their emotions, thus contributing to their successful military and civic education.

Another larger study, *Guerreros que aprendieron a jugar lejos de su casa: el caso de los mercenarios hispanos del s. IV A. C.*, authored by Raimon Graells i Fabregat, discusses the presence of disc-shaped convex gaming pieces made of coloured glass and decorated with a spiral motif in graves containing weapons from the Late Iron Age Iberian Peninsula (p. 59–89). Through a contextual, comparative analysis, the author convincingly argues that several different Italic board games have been taken over and sometimes modified by the local warriors during their mercenary activities in the central Mediterranean, most likely due to close contacts and exchanges of practices and ideas. In the local environment, these glass gaming pieces apparently became signs of status, so one must ask whether they were ultimately detached from the actual game to only act as symbolic tokens in funerary contexts, even when they ceased to be exclusively associated with the warriors.

Miguel F. Pérez Blasco examines another category of artefacts possibly associated with board games in the Iberian Iron Age – the knucklebones – in the article titled *Tabas en las tumbas ibéricas ;Que la suerte nos acompañe!* (p. 91–118). It has to be noted that the topic was already widely discussed in archaeological literature, the knucklebones being ascribed different meanings, from ludic to magic and divinatory<sup>4</sup>. The present study covers the period between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC, taking into consideration only funerary contexts, and using the statistical multivariate analysis to identify particular use patterns. The author notes that there is more than one explanation for the presence of knucklebones in graves, while the number, treatment, positioning and grave-goods associations are very important for the identification of their most-likely function. Based on these observations, he considers that in the case of warriors, the knucklebones were primarily used in gambling games in which a certain degree of superstition cannot be excluded.

The following contribution, *Armes, pieces de jeu et jeux de table: les celtes transalpains et cisalpains aux IV<sup>e</sup> et III<sup>e</sup> siècles av. J.-C. et leur voisins*, authored by Thierry Lejars, returns to the

<sup>4</sup> See the summary in DE GROSSI MAZZORIN/MINNITI 2013.

question of the social significance of the board games by examining funerary contexts associated with the Celtic populations on both sides of the Alps and their neighbours (p. 119–153). The analysis indicates that the board games were used as signs of status in elite burials belonging to both men and women alongside other grave goods like LT swords and helmets, feasting implements, toiletries and jewellery. Together they formed a complex visual language which was meant to underline both the physical and intellectual prowess of the deceased, as well as their belonging to a group of individuals having different origins but sharing similar social and cultural values.

The contribution of Alessandro Pace, *Play at being Romans. Ludus e omologazione culturale nei contesti militari del mondo romano*, examines the role of board games in the process of so-called “cultural validation”, an alternative term for the much maligned “Romanization” (p. 155–167). Based on a few case-studies dated to the late Republic and early Empire, the investigation takes into consideration the adoption of Italic board games among the auxiliary soldiers headquartered in Hispania and Britannia, underlining not only their increasing degree of popularity, but also their association with other habits of Mediterranean origin. That the Roman army was a major factor in the provincialization of many communities from temperate Europe is not a novel observation<sup>5</sup>. What was less discussed until now is the role of these board games (and of other shared formal or leisure practices) in the socialization processes that were specific to the Roman military environment, helping to create a deep camaraderie and a strong collective identity. These practices and the resulting identity constructs in turn contributed to the emergence of ways of “being Roman” that influenced the development of provincial societies across the Empire<sup>6</sup>.

The presumed connection between warrior identity and board games in funerary inventories is also discussed in the following contribution, *Warriors, games and male identity. The evidence from northern Greece*, authored by Eftychia Alevizou (p. 169–184). The archaeological evidence is presented in chronological order starting with the late 6<sup>th</sup>–early 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, though the practice of placing board games or game pieces in graves is notably absent during most of the Classical period, only regaining popularity in the early Hellenistic period. Some of the examples indicate that such grave-goods were also placed in non-elite male graves, or in those of boys who died before assuming a social role, so they might not have necessarily served as markers of the warrior identity in funerary contexts. Nonetheless, the article looks more like a work in progress, only hinting at the interpretive potential of the available archaeological evidence.

The following contribution, *Beyond the grave: burial rituals and knucklebones at the state war memorial of Thespieae*, authored by Barbara Carè, delves into a topic on which she previously wrote extensively – the practical and symbolic functions of the knucklebones (p. 185–199). Starting from a case-study made difficult by the fact that it was excavated more than a century ago, Carè is dismissing the simplistic interpretation of these finds in adult burials as reminders of a long gone childhood. Based on careful contextual analyses of the assemblages containing the knucklebones, she is convincingly demonstrating that they were sometimes integrated into a complex set of visual symbols which were meant to underline the deceased’s social status and upbringing, while in other cases they served as visual substitutes of sacrificed animals during the commemorative rituals at the grave.

The last contribution, *La Guerra dei satiri*, authored by Mauro Menichetti, is actually a comment (doubling as homage) on a chapter from the last book of the late François Lissarrague, *La cité des satyres. Une anthropologie ludique (Athènes, VIe-Ve siècle avant J.-C.)*,

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the works cited by the author (note 5), see for example several relevant studies in ERDKAMP 2002 or DE BLOIS ET AL. 2007; see also SPEIDEL 2009.

<sup>6</sup> See EGRI 2017.

which was published in 2013. The chapter in question deals with the representation on Attic painted vessels of the involvement of Dionysus and his satyrs in the Gigantomachy. The connection with the topic of this volume may seem less obvious until the image of the playful satyrs with their often improbable weapons is seen as an inverted, irreverent image of the heroic ideal of the hoplite, which defined the dominant male identity, thus hinting at the social tensions of the Greek polis. This interesting discussion could have benefited from further considerations about the functions of these vessels, the contexts in which they were used, and the ways in which these images were seen by artisans and consumers.

One has to note that there is not much in terms of an organic development of the book based on a fluent dialogue between the contributions, which is a welcome feature of some recently published proceedings volumes. Aside from the two contributions discussing the literary evidence, all others are including relevant illustrations (drawings, photos, tables, graphs and maps), albeit in some cases their quality is far from adequate, e.g. the maps are too small. No typos or misspellings were identified in text. The cited literature is listed separately at the end of the volume.

Overall, this new book is a useful addition to the current debates regarding the role of play, and of board games in particular, in the social dynamics of the past communities, offering fresh insights into a number of relevant categories of evidence.

**Mariana Egri**

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