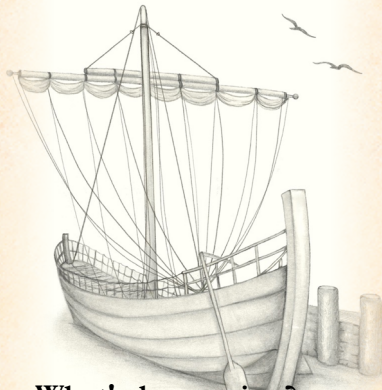




Historically Speaking

Volume 4, Number 9 September 2025

Ancient Greek Board Games



What's happening?

I have been recovering from knee replacement surgery (right knee this time.) Once I was cleared by the surgeon to stop wearing those annoying compression stockings, I began swimming a mile every day. As of August 31 (when I am sending this newsletter), I have done 93 miles.

Meanwhile, I continue to work on Amon, which is becoming an epic challenge. I think it will be my best book yet.

This is also the season when I work in the shop. I am getting close to finishing four more rocking chairs (#'s 13,14,15, and 16.) Three are ordered and one for the craft fairs.

The ancient Greeks spent much of their time playing board games practically on a daily basis. They were a beloved part of ancient Greek culture. In fact, board games captured the imagination of many people in ancient Greece, including poets, philosophers, and the masses alike. Hence, numerous written sources reveal valuable information on the significance of board games in the daily lives of ancient Greeks.

Games like Petteia and Tabula were particularly popular. These games served as more than mere entertainment for the purpose of killing time. They also taught players valuable moral lessons, incorporating divine wisdom. By getting a closer look at the rules, strategies, and cultural significance of these ancient games played thousands of years ago, we can better comprehend the morals and beliefs of the ancient Greeks.

Five Lines: A lost game of strategy

Pente Grammai is another famous and well-known ancient Greek game widely played in Greece. "Pente Grammai" is Greek for "Five Lines." This is an ancient Greek board game that has largely been lost to time. Nonetheless, it was once widely played by many people.

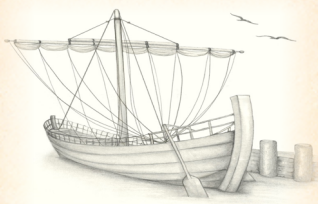
Based on what is known thus far about the game, its origins date back to at least 600 BC. This is assumed based on artifacts and references in ancient poetry that have survived to this day and can be objectively verified for their age.

While the complete set of rules of Pente Grammai is unknown, it is believed dice were used to determine the movement of pieces from the outer lines of the board towards the center. The ultimate goal was most likely to eliminate or trap opponents' pieces much like other contemporary strategy games.



Achilles and Ajax playing a board game, often identified as Five Lines, a common theme in [ancient Greek](#) artwork. Credit Sailko, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0

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Petteia: The board game of flanking

This is the game being played in my books.

One of the most well-known of board games in ancient Greece loved by almost everyone was Petteia, also known as Pesseia. This game was traditionally played on a rectangular board with an equal number of pieces, typically of two different colors, for each player. The objective of the board game was to strategically flank and capture the pieces of the opponent by surrounding them.

Petteia figured prominently in Greek mythology and literature, as well. This explains why so much is known about this board game today. The game was actually attributed by Plato to the Egyptian god Theuth. This embodied the ancient Greek board game in an air of sacred symbolism and made it especially valuable. It was also famously mentioned in one of the world's most epic poems, the *Odyssey* by Homer.

While the exact rules of Petteia have been lost to time and we don't have a detailed explanation of the guidelines of the game, it is clear that it involved complex strategic thinking about the movement of pieces. The particular ancient Greek board game required detailed and careful planning to outperform and outsmart the opponent.

Tabula: Ancestor of the board game backgammon

Another particularly beloved and popular board game in ancient Greece was Tabula. This game actually bears a striking resemblance to the later Roman game called Duodecim Scripta, which in turn, is very similar to the modern board game of backgammon. Tabula was played by the Greeks mainly on a board with two rows of a total of 12 spaces each. Fifteen pieces per player were used.

Nonetheless, the game was not exactly like the backgammon we all know today. There were certain small but crucial differences from the backgammon millions of people enjoy playing today. In the ancient Greek board game of Tabula, a round of play began with all the pieces off the board. Players used three dice instead of two to determine their moves.

Legend has it the board game was invented by a Greek soldier named Alea. Alea allegedly fought in the Trojan War, during which he probably came up with the idea for this game.

Kottabos: Not just another ancient Greek game

Kottabos was another quite popular game. However, this was a drinking game rather than a board game. Understandably, this game was especially popular during the symposia—which were drinking parties. This drinking game involved flinging the sediments of your friend's wine at selected targets. People would use a very shallow cup called a “kylix.”

In the most common version of the game, a bronze disc, known as a plastinx in Greek, was balanced atop a tall metal stand in the center of the room. Another metal dish was placed just below it. Players of the game would attempt to knock the plastinx down with a well-aimed toss of their wine-lees. This movement would cause it to clatter down onto the lower dish.

The ancient Greek Kottabos game required sophisticated targeting skills to play successfully. Players also dedicated their throws to objects of their desire. This led to a situation where success was seen as a clearly auspicious sign of future fortune with a particular emphasis on the love life of the players.

As we can imagine, however, the game undoubtedly resulted in quite a messy room by the end of the symposium. This was expected at such events. Depictions of Kottabos are also not uncommon on Greek vases, from which we have attained most of our understanding of the ancient Greek game's rules and popularity.

The ancient Greeks loved their board games

Even though not widely known to us today, board games such as Petteia, Tabula, and Pente Grammai were very popular in ancient Greece. They were an integral part of the lives and culture of ancient Greeks. By examining the rules of these games as well as their customs, we can safely make conclusions about broader and more general topics such as morality and even beliefs related to divine wisdom.

These games were essentially metaphors for military strategy, political maneuvering, and intellectual pursuits of the young and old. They reflected the values and beliefs of the society that created and cherished them.

It is also safe to say the influence of many ancient Greek board games extended far beyond their time. As the Romans integrated with the Greeks during the expansion of the Roman Empire, ancient Greek board games shaped later Roman and, therefore, medieval European games. Today, traces of what we know about these ancient games can be found in modern variants such as backgammon and chess.