Ancient Board Games
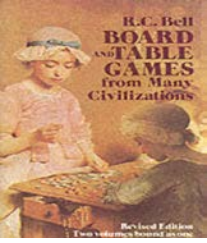## Duodecim Scripta & Tabula

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Boa tarde

- Meu nome é Eddie Duggan
- Eu sou de Universidade de Suffolk, UK
- Eu ensino em um curso de design de jogos de computador
- Desculpe, mas eu tenho que falar em Inglês ...

Duodecim Scripta

- ***Ludus duodecim scriptorum***, or ***duodecim scripta*** for short, is "the game of twelve lines" or "the game of twelve marks".

- Bell (1979) reproduces an image of a game, engraved on the back of an Etruscan silver mirror (*ca* C2nd – 3rd BC) showing a couple engaged in a game using a board marked with twelve lines.

Bell (1979) vol. 1 p. 30.

- The mirror is on permanent display in the British Museum
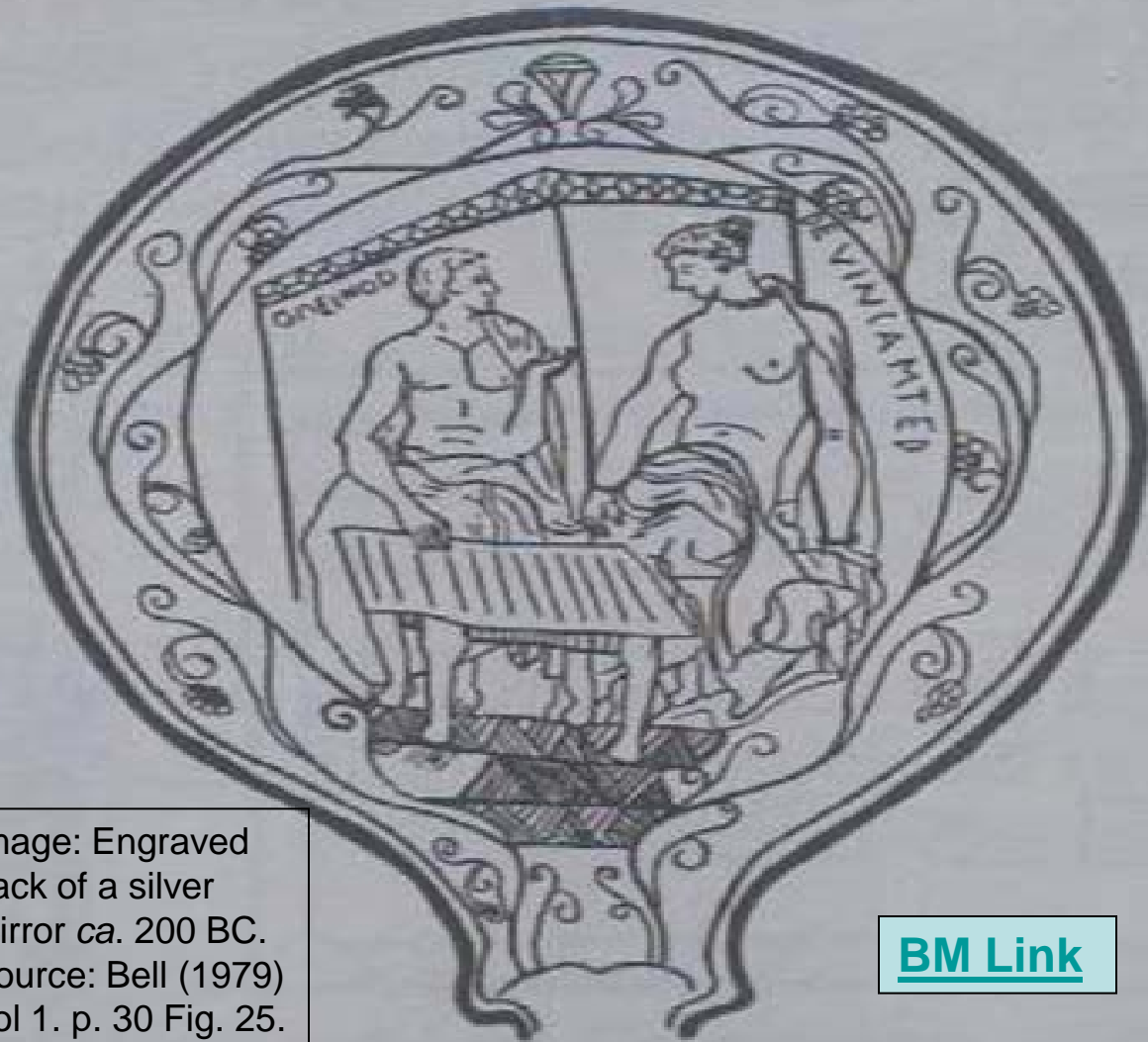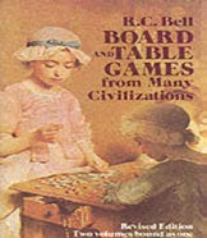
  (Room 69, Greek & Roman Life)

Image: Engraved back of a silver mirror *ca*. 200 BC. Source: Bell (1979) Vol 1. p. 30 Fig. 25.

BM Link

Duodecim Scripta

- Bell's source (Comparetti, a C19th Italian) suggests the engraving may show the orginal version of *XII scripta*.

- Parlett (1999, p. 71) tells us the archaic Latin caption above the male player ("ofeinod") isn't translatable. The caption beside the female player ("de vincamted") is translated as "I believe I have won" or "I'll beat you".

12 lines *or* 5 lines?

- Some authors suggest this engraved mirror actually shows the Greek game *pente grammai* (five lines):
  - Schadler (1998) "Mancala in Roman Asia Minor?" p. 17.
  - Schadler (2008) "*Pente Grammai* – The Ancient Greek Board Game 'Five Lines'" p. 179.
  - Bardiès-Fronty and Dunn-Vaturi (2012) *Art du jeu, jeu dans l'art* p. 62
- We won't examine Schadler's case in any detail here, but the references are provided for anyone who may be interested in following up the point independently.
- NB: Schadler (2008) also provides rules for *penta grammai*

Greek -> Etruscan

- The Etruscans adopted various Greek practices, including reclining, the symposium and games, both physical and sedentary.

- A representation of a game board can be seen in the C4th BC Etruscan "Tomb of the Reliefs" (in modern Cerveteri), with markings similar to those of the engraved Etruscan mirror.

Tomb of the Reliefs

Cerveteri - Reliefs Tomb

2:41 / 3:20

3D Images / 3D video:
- http://bit.ly/1Yc3XQO

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=161&v=KvWOFoWICwk

On your marks …

- *Duodecim scripta* boards were marked in a variety of different ways. Some layouts used symbols, others used six-letter words:

Left: Game board, Ephesus Museum, Turkey. ca. 100BC. Photo by Jens Chrisofferson CC. Source: www.flickr.com/photos/nsop/191607/

Right: Game board/menu: we have on table chicken fish ham peacock. Excavated from a tavern near the Praetrorian camp, Rome. National Museum of Rome

Twelve lines, marks or spots?

- Austin (1934 & 1935) tells us the two boards are used for the same game and not, as previously thought, two different games.

- Austin also translates "duodecim scripta" as "twelve marks" or "twelve lines"

- Schadler (1998) suggests "twelve marks" might refer to the marks or spots on two dice used to play the game.

Parallel Lines

- On the later game board, marked with symbols or letters, twelve lines can be seen, not running left to right as we might expect (as that would give either three or six lines), but instead run vertically, *across* the symbols or words:

Left: Duodecim scripta board

Right: the lines run vertically, *across* the words

Twelve lines?

- This suggestion, however, omits the central bar.

Murray on *duodecim scripta*

- Murray describes *duodecim scripta* as a backgammon-style race-game for two players, each of whom has "fifteen men whose moves are governed by the throws of three cubic dice" (Murray, 1952: p. 31).

- Murray comments that one example of a board, from Ostia, set out with groups of letters A – E rather than words, "obviously indicates the order in which men are entered moved and borne in the course of play" (Murray, 1952: p. 31).
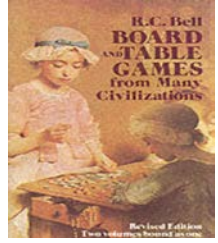
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CCCCCC @ BBBBBB

AAAAAA @ AAAAAA

DDDDDD @ EEEEEE
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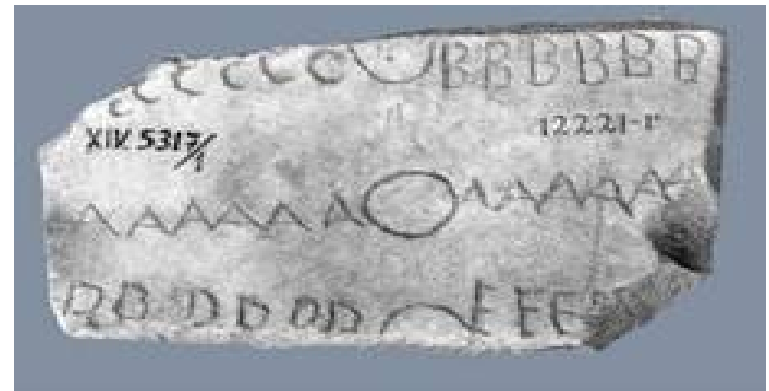
Bell on *duodecim scripta*

- Bell describes a board, game pieces, dice and the remains of a dice box (*fritillus*), excavated in 1931 from tombs in Qustul dating from C4th AD which, he notes, belonged to the ruling class of a people descended from the Pharaonic Egyptians (Bell, 1979 pp. 28-29).

  - Qustul is in Nubia, a territory south of Egypt (now Sudan). The archaeological site is now beneath Lake Nasser.

FIG. 24. Copy of a fritillus or dice-box based on plate XXXII in Emery's *Nubian Treasure*

- Bell links the Qustul board to The Game of Thirty Squares or senet.

- It clearly has the same layout as *duodecim scripta,* and Bell also notes this similarity (p. 31)

Upper image: The Qustul fritillus (Bell 1979 p. 29).
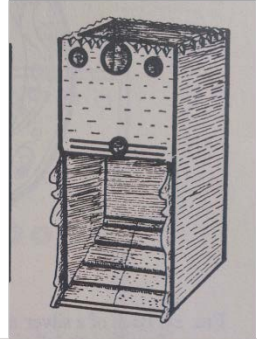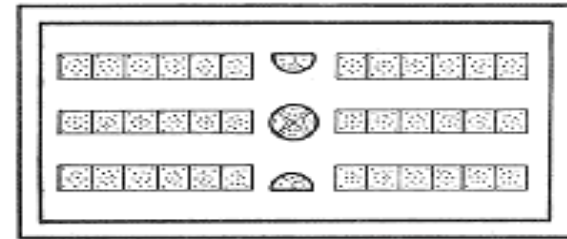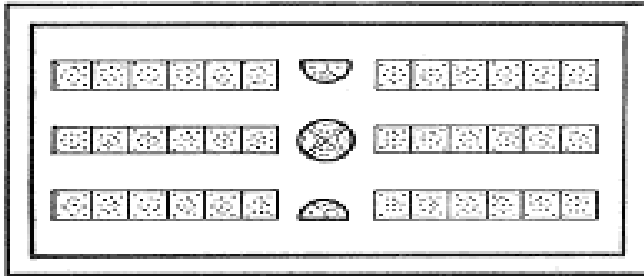Lower image: The Qustul game board

The decline of *duodecim scripta*

- Bell notes that *duodecim scripta* fell out of favour during C1st AD, to be replaced by a variant called *tabula,* which has four sets of six points rather than six sets of six.
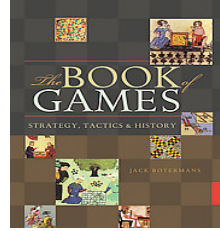

Above left: *duodecim scripta.*
Six sets of six points. Each player enters pieces on the centre row before racing around the outer rows.
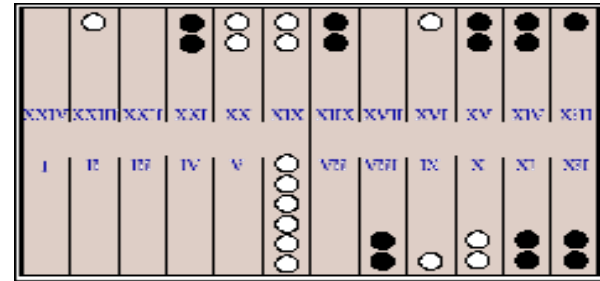
Above right: *tabula*
Four sets of six points. Players enter pieces on points 1-12 before racing to bear off from points 9-24

Botermans' *XII Scripta*

- Jack Botermans provides a brief historical overview of *duodecim scripta*, along with a rule set based on what he calls the "reconstructions" of "various experts" (Botermans, 2008 p. 289).

- Botermans doesn't identify the experts, and his *Book of Games*, whilst lavishly illustrated, lacks references and does not provide a bibliography.

- It does, however, provide a step-by-step guide to a sample game of *duodecim scripta* (along with a similar guide to many other board games).

Playing *XII Scripta*

- Each player has fifteen pieces
- The game is played with three six-sided dice
- Players roll all three dice; the three numbers can be used individually or combined (but a piece must be able to land on each landing point)
- All moves must be taken whenever possible

Phase one: enter the pieces

- According to Botermans, each player enters all 15 pieces on his or her home points (p. 291).
  - Any number of pieces can be placed on a point
- Players take it in turns to throw the dice and place their pieces.

WHITE

White home → 1 2 3 4 5 6 1 2 3 4 5 6 ← Black home

BLACK
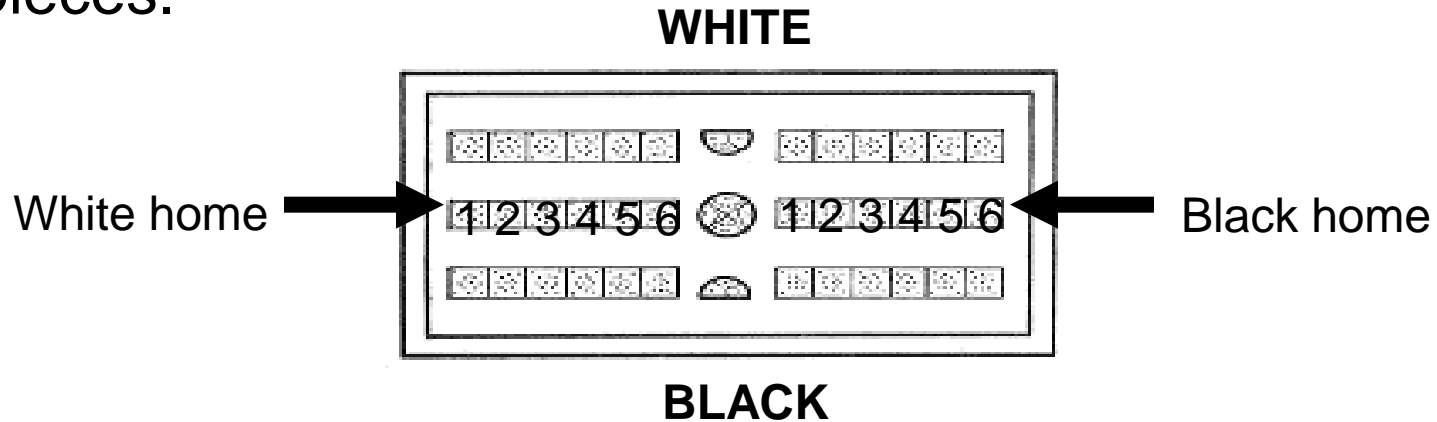
Phase Two: start moving

- After a player has entered all 15 pieces onto his or her first six points (the "A" points) the pieces can start to move around the board through the B, C and D points and into the E points.
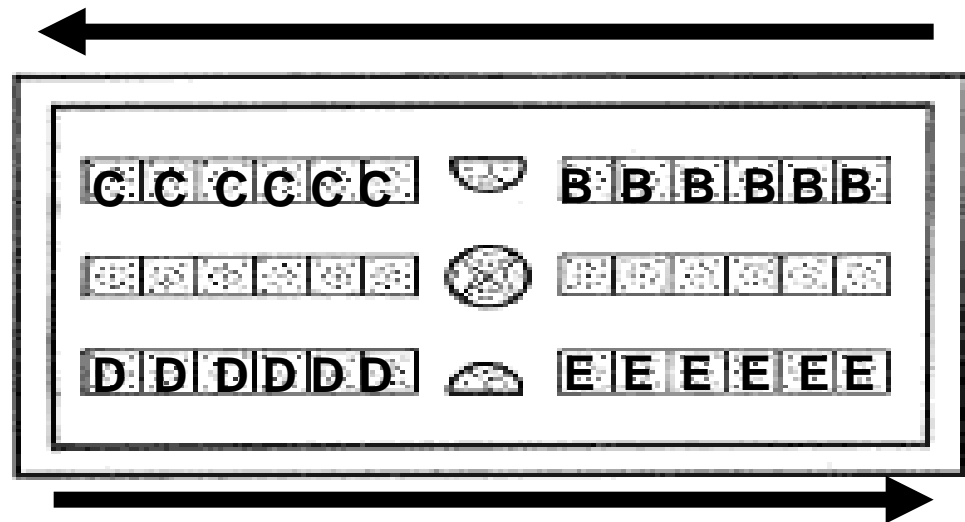
Phase Three: Bear off

- When a player has all his pieces on the exit points, he throws with one dice.

- A piece may only be removed from the board when the exact number is thrown.

- If a piece cannot be removed, it may be moved within the exit table or, if it cannot be moved or removed, the throw is forfeited.
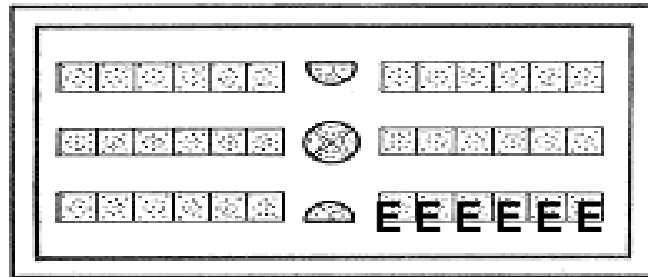
Other rules

- Pieces on the entry squares are safe from capture (cf the first four squares in the Ur game).
- Elsewhere, a single piece can be removed from the board and has to be entered again.
- Where pieces are stacked, they cannot be taken.
- A player can stack any number of pieces on a single point.
- Stacked pieces move as a single piece

Variations and uncertainties

- Some variations allow a stack of pieces to be taken by a stack the same size or greater.

- Botermans' board is numbered in such a way that on the exit points, 6 is the last point (in backgammon, the numbers run the other way)
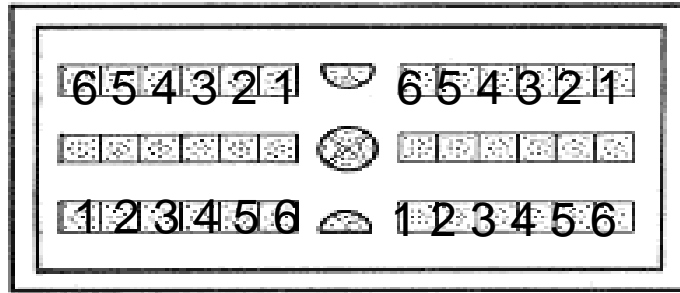
- Botermans is the only source I have seen that suggests players use a single dice while bearing off.

- In Finkel's (2005) simplified rule set, played with six pieces and two dice, pieces are not allowed to be stacked on the entry points.

Finkel's *XII Scripta*
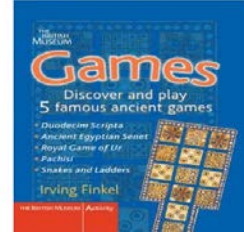
- Pieces start off the [board](#) (six pieces each).   [[Finkel's board](#)]
- Each player rolls two dice (D6).
- Pieces enter on the centre row (1-6), one per point (when moving from an entry point to the race track, all entry points have the same value).
- Players can combine dice values to move 1 or 2 pieces but pieces must be able to land on each end point.
- Players can enter new pieces, move along the race track or move along the entry squares.
- Single pieces can be knocked off and must be re-entered.
- Pieces can stack on a point and can move as a stack.
- A smaller stack cannot take a larger stack.
- An exact throw is needed to bear off.

tabula – alea – backgammon

- At some point in the C6[th] AD, the game *tabula* became known as *alea*. Previously, as Murray notes, *alea* referred to any game of chance (Murray, 1952 p. 29).

- Bell quotes an oft-cited line from Isodore of Seville, who noted "alea, id est ludus tabulae …" ("alea, that is the game of tables …") [*Origines* XVIII] (Bell, 1979 p. 35)

- As with *duodecim scripta,* in *tabula* or *alea* pieces travel in the same direction as each other.

- In backgammon, pieces start on the board, travel in opposite directions and players bear-off from their own home table.

Transistional phase

- Ulrich Schädler (1995) discusses evidence of a transitional phase between *duodecim scripta* and *tabula*, based on several games boards that appear to be *duodecim scripta* boards with a "missing" row.

- Schädler also problematises the known or the suggested rules, asserting there is no evidence to tell us if pieces travelled in the same direction, or moved in a contraflow style, as in backgammon, or if pieces were borne off after reaching the home table.

Evolution of game mechanics

- In the game of twenty squares (the Royal Game of Ur), safe squares and squares with special properties are introduced: the entry squares are "safe" and a piece landing on a rosette square cannot be taken (the player earns another throw).

- In the game of thirty squares (senet) two adjacent pieces protect each other, while three adjacent pieces form an impassable block.

- In *duodecim scripta*, a single piece can be taken, but two (or more) pieces together are protected.

- In backgammon, two pieces on the same point are protected and cannot be taken. A player throwing "a double" (eg 3+3) gets the score doubled literally and moves *four* times (eg 4x3).

Play Online

- A version of *duodecim scripta* can be played online, or downloaded, here:
http://www.novelgames.com/en/mpgames/duodecim/

- An online version of *tabula* can be played here:
http://gwydir.demon.co.uk/jo/games/tabula/

Further reading

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See also:

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