

Discover...

# GAMES

## Mancala

It has been suggested that mancala is the oldest board game in the world: evidence of mancala has been found in Africa in archaeological contexts from the third century AD and earlier. It is still played in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, parts of South America, and the Middle East.

This boat-shaped board is a local version of mancala from Thailand called main chakot. It was collected in 1901 or 1902.

The basic form of the game of mancala consists of a board with holes and counters.



▲ Main chakot board, Thailand; 1902.88.202

The term 'mancala' comes from an Arabic word meaning 'to move' and the game involves two players or teams taking it in turns to drop their pieces into the holes, moving them around the board in a set direction. The aim is to capture as many of one's opponent's pieces as possible.

Mancala boards are most often made from wood, but can also be made from clay, stone, pottery, animal dung, metal, or ivory. Seeds are usually used as counters, but cowrie shells, small stones, pottery fragments, clay balls, and



◀ Clay balls used for playing mancala, Sudan; 1937.34.50 .2-.42



◀ Seeds used as mancala counters, Nigeria; 1922.23.81.2-52

marbles can also be used. Mancala is often played without a board, with holes simply scooped out of the ground to create a playing surface.

Two-row mancala is the most popular version of the game and the easiest to play, but there is a huge variety of different versions of the board, different rules and different local names, and rules are always developing and changing. Mancala is thought to have originated in either Asia or Africa. The rules in Africa are often more complex and diverse than in Asia, suggesting it originated there.

Mancala has been played in both ritual and recreational contexts. When used in ritual, it has been played at weddings, funerals, divination, and other ceremonies. In Uganda, the Ganda king played mancala as part of his accession ceremony. Recreationally, the people who play the game varies geographically – in Asia mancala is more often played by women and children, whereas in Africa it is mainly played by men. In several areas of Africa mancala forms part of a boy's education, and is restricted to the period after circumcision; elsewhere it is played primarily by old men.

## Chess

Chess is thought to have originated in India. Two important precursor Indian games were the four-player war game chaturanga and the two-player war game shatranj. Chess first appeared around the sixth century AD, and by the tenth century had spread to the Middle East and Europe. By the end of the eleventh century, chess was very popular amongst the European aristocracy, with sets being made from luxurious materials such as gold, rock crystal, and ivory. Over the years chess has been banned by religious leaders and rulers, both because of its military subject matter, and because it has been thought to encourage gambling. For example Louis IX forbade the game in France in 1254.

Rule changes have been common throughout the game's history, and the design of the pieces has also varied in different places and at different times.

This Chinese set has wooden chessmen, with seeds and fragments of wood used as pawns. The pieces are stored in a coconut shell. The set has no board, which would have been marked out in the ground or on a piece of wood.

The standards for modern sets were established in about 1835 with a design by an Englishman, Nathaniel Cook. It was endorsed by the world's best player of the time, Howard Staunton. Today only sets based on the Staunton design are allowed in international competition.



▲ Chessmen, China; 1902.88.200

# Knucklebones

Knucklebones or astralagi was a common game in ancient Greece. One version of the game was similar to the modern game of jacks. It involved throwing the knucklebones – which were usually sheep anklebones – into the air and catching them on the back of the hand. Another version of the game consisted of throwing one of the bones into the air and then trying to pick the others up from the ground before catching the first.



▲ Knucklebones, Italy; 1895.9.15

Knucklebones was therefore essentially a game of skill, but a derivative form of the game was to assign the four sides of the bone different values and play with the bones as dice. Indeed it has been proposed that modern dice developed from knucklebones.

Knucklebones was popular with young women and children in ancient Greece. People in many other cultures have played variants of knucklebones, including the Anglo-Saxons and the Romans, who called it tali. In some instances actual sheep anklebones were used; in others, completely different objects such as pieces of stone or metal were used. These other materials were even sometimes fashioned into the shape of bones.

# Pachisi

Pachisi has been described as the ‘national game of India’. It first appeared in India several centuries ago, and then spread to other parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe. Pachisi is usually played on a piece of cross-shaped cloth. It is played by four players, each with four pieces. The two opposite side are partners, and they win or lose together. The players race their counters around the board, and attempt to block their opponents. In the nineteenth century the well-known game of Ludo was patented in the UK. It is a simplified version of pachisi.



▲ Pachisi board, India; 1932.89.205

# Further Reading

DE VOOGT, ALEXANDER, *Mancala Board Games*, London: British Museum Press (1997).

The objects found in this Information sheet can be found at the following locations:

## **Lower Gallery** (first floor)

Cases L89A and L90A – Games

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