



## Games on the seashore of Salalah: the discovery of mancala games in Dhofar, Sultanate of Oman

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# ARABIAN ARCHAEOLOGY AND EPIGRAPHY

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# Games on the seashore of Salalah: the discovery of mancala games in Dhofar, Sultanate of Oman

During the 2013 fieldwork of the French archaeological mission along the shores of the Arabian Sea, mancala games were discovered on the seashore of Salalah at the site of Ad-Dahariz. They are cup-hole carvings made directly into rock slabs and distributed in six distinct zones of the site. They usually consist of fourteen cup-holes aligned in two lines of seven, two supplementary holes being sometimes present on each side. They are the first of their kind in South Arabia and can be compared to similar configurations of carved games elsewhere in Arabia, such as at Jebel al-Jassasiya, Qatar. This paper presents the potential origins of this game in the region, as well as a plausible dating of their use.

**Keywords:** mancala, *hawalīs*, Ottomans, Dhofar, Oman

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## Introduction

The study of board games has accelerated since Murray’s (1952) seminal publication with overviews that include an increasing number of so-called graffiti games (Bell 1979; Parlett 1999; Finkel 2007). Within the broad category of graffiti games, the commonest is probably those carved in stone that include games found on living rock surfaces and those cut into buildings and other man-made structures. Examples have been observed in excavations related to Roman and Greek antiquity by Austin (1934, 1935) and later by Bell (1979) and Bell and Roueché (2007), and in particular Schädler (1994, 1995, 1998). The latter made the important distinction between games from antiquity

and those found on or near monuments from antiquity but left there at a later time.

The games associated with the Arabs and Ottomans, such as *siga* (also known as *seeja*, *sija* or *seega*) and *mancala*, are also found in the sand or on wooden boards in the modern era—two forms that cannot be or are rarely preserved in archaeology. Conclusions on the distribution of these games in historical times are complicated by the relative absence of such playing practices in the historical record.

Both Schädler (1994, 1995, 1998) and de Voogt (2010, 2012) have elaborated on the distinction between games from antiquity and those introduced by the Arabs and Ottomans so that it has become possible to associate sev-

eral graffiti games more accurately. This is particularly true for cup-shaped holes that outside classical Roman and Greek sites can now be associated with known mancala, siga and tab games found mainly in the Middle East. Mancala games commonly consist of two rows of holes or depressions, siga games usually consist of a grid of 5 x 5 squares or holes, while tab games mostly consist of four rows of small holes or depressions. Each of these games has variations that could confuse the distinction between these games; for example, tab games resemble four-row mancala games. Unfortunately, the time period in which siga and tab games were developed and spread throughout the region is still little understood. Mancala games have so far been associated with the Ottoman Empire, which helps to understand their distribution and history. Mulvin and Sidebotham (2004) claim to have found mancala games associated with a Roman fort at Abu Sha'ar in Egypt. Schädler (1998), however, has shown that two rows of five holes can also be associated with the game of five lines, a game not associated with mancala. De Voogt (2010) found that the excavated Roman parts of Palmyra only showed two rows of five, while the parts that were later occupied by Ottoman or Arab garrisons featured different configurations.

In January 2013, the French archaeological mission located a group of regular horizontal cup-shaped engravings on the seashore of the city of Salalah, capital of Dhofar (Sultanate of Oman). The configurations point to graffiti games that are not only found in Oman but also on the Arabian Peninsula in general.

### **A coastal lagoon: the khor of Ad-Dahariz or 'eastern khor'**

The French archaeological mission is developing a multi-disciplinary approach, at the crossroads of archaeology and palaeogeography, in order to detect climatic and eustatic fluctuations that would have modified the equilibrium between natural environments and human groups (Berger *et al.* 2013; Charpentier *et al.* 2012, 2013). All along the 1000 km of the Omani side of the Arabian Sea, the mission is exploring favourable zones where different environments mix. Mangroves and lagoons are of particular interest, and a survey was carried out near the Khor Ad-Dahariz and Khor Sawli.

Ad-Dahariz is one of the principal lagoons of Dhofar and part of the plain of Salalah (with Rawri, Hassan, Sawli, Balid, Salalah, West and Thet). With a surface area of 150 ha, this narrow lagoon is fed by the monsoon rains that flow

from Wādī Sahnūt. *Phragmites*, *Juncus* and sedges develop on these mainly rocky shores, but *Avicenna marina* is not present. A rich zone for bird nesting, this khor has been designated a nature reserve (Al Muscati *et al.* 1995).

On either side of the khor, palaeo-forms corresponding to fossil coastal bands are clearly visible in the satellite images. We were able to locate the *Terebralia palustris* palaeo-mangrove, the disappearance of which was thought to be concomitant with that of the palaeo-mangroves of Al-Balid and Rawri and thus related to the same phenomena (lagoon closures, etc.; Hoorn & Cremaschi 2004; Zarins 2007).

Between Rayzut and Taqah, the limestone banks on the coastal plain of Salalah have been much exploited. These outcropping banks can measure between 2 and 6 m in thickness and were much sought after (Costa 1979). Many quarries are still visible in the landscape. The site of Ad-Dahariz was exploited for its limestone slabs, the removal of which has partially destroyed a settlement dating to the seventh–fifth millennia BC (Fig. 1). Surrounded by cotton fields and groves of coconut palms, the village of Ad-Dahariz dating to the nineteenth century AD was composed of 100 houses of stone and earth, occupied by fishermen and farmers. Protected by several watchtowers, in 1836 this village appears to have been the largest village in the area (Lorimer 1915; Miles 1919; Wharton 1900). The blocks extracted from the site were probably intended for the construction of the houses of this village, as well as, possibly, for the building or rebuilding of a part of the town of Al-Balid (AD 500–1700), 4 km away.

### **The graffiti**

Some of the outcropping slabs present little cup-holes on their surface that are usually shallow and form short lines. Some much larger and deeper cup-holes are also attested. They have parallels on other Omani sites such as Khuwaymah KHU-2 and on the island of Masirah (unpublished), and also in the Jebel Jassasiyah in Qatar (e.g. Hassiba *et al.* 2012). The cup-hole carvings of Ad-Dahariz are distributed in six distinct zones, covering a large surface of the site. They usually consist of fourteen cup-holes aligned in two lines of seven (Fig. 2). These configurations are usually isolated, sometimes two sets together, and one large slab (no. 3) presents a whole group of them. The majority of the configurations identified consist of two lines of seven holes, two supplementary holes being sometimes present on each side. Partly buried under sand, slab no. 3 is composed of a whole assemblage of these (Fig. 3).



Fig. 1.  
A general view of the khor of Ad-Dahariz, Salalah.



Fig. 2.  
Rock carvings in the shape of a board game (detail), Salalah.



Fig. 3.  
Rock carvings in the shape of board games (slab no. 3), Salalah.

Besides the series of 7 x 2 elements, it also has in its centre a series of cup-holes that are more difficult to identify.

Several similar configurations of holes have been discovered in Arabia (Glob 1957). The most well known, identified by Peter Glob in the 1950s, is located on Jebel al-Jassasiya, a small limestone butte, which, like Ad-Dahariz, is by the sea, on the north-east coast of Qatar. Among the more than 900 listed petroglyphs, the most common (333 examples) are configurations of two lines of seven or nine cup-holes (Hassiba *et al.* 2012). Similar sets in the Wadi Rum and at Petra (Jordan) have been listed as well (Khrisat & Akasheh 2002); in this area, however,

there are three or four rows of holes that commonly refer to tab games (Depaulis 2001) and should not be confused with mancala.

Two rows of holes are not necessarily instances of games, as holes may be used for grinding or other activities that could be associated with quarries or tool production. The possibility of a game is more likely when it is attested in a games context, that is, an area in which other games are present. Such a game context is not always available but, for instance, there is a game that can be identified as a game of tab attested in Qatar in a similar environment as those found in Oman. Next to a games



context, the presence of a tradition of carving games in stone helps to identify not only the games but also the players. Two rows of seven holes are a common configuration for mancala games associated with the Ottomans in the Balkans (Bikić & Vuković 2010), Syria (de Voogt 2010) and as far south as Sudan (de Voogt 2012). The region of Salalah falls comfortably within the zone of the former Ottoman Empire and makes the presence of mancala games in stone a likely proposition.

### The players

In August 1507, the flotilla of Alfonso of Albuquerque left Socotra to ravage the maritime cities of Oman. In 1517 the Ottomans seized the coastal plains of Yemen, and particularly those of Aden in 1538. This date marks the beginning of the modern period in Yemen. Achieved under the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent, the Turkish domination of the country was to remain precarious. In 1635 the Ottomans withdrew to Mocha, and a large part of the troops deserted; the imam then accorded the last Ottomans the right to leave the country. At the end of the Middle Ages, the Rasulid era and the fourteenth century were periods of intense construction activity in the large city of Dhofar, Al-Balid. The arrival of Portuguese, Turkish and Mamluk forces, bringing with them new naval and military technologies to the Arabian Sea, influenced in part the decline of the city. It is known, however, that after the collapse of Al-Balid (the ancient Zafar), a part of the city was dismantled and many architectural blocks were reused (Costa 1979). Thus, monolithic pillars of the medieval city were reused in the old grand mosque of Ad-Dahariz during a later period (1979: fig. 49b). This reuse suggests that demand for stone and construction materials was still high in the area of Ad-Dahariz, at one time the capital of the large Khathiri tribe. The Ad-Dahariz quarry could very well have been exploited for its high-quality limestone during this period. The quarrymen of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries AD were thus potential players of mancala. In Syria and Sudan, soldiers were identified as the most likely players and while this cannot be ruled out for Salalah, without further evidence the case for the quarrymen is more convincing here.

Although the association with the former Ottoman Empire is most likely, it does not eliminate the suggestion that this tradition of game production and game playing has continued to this day. Omanis still play a mancala game that can be found in the city of Muscat (Fig. 4), but the current mancala game in Oman, known as *hawalis*,



Fig. 4.

Omani men playing *hawalis* in Muscat, Oman (photograph Alex de Voogt, 2002).

has four rows of holes and is not related to the game played by the Ottomans. This game is associated with mancala as it is found in present-day Mozambique, where similar boards and playing rules have been observed and from where, most likely, the slave trade has aided the distribution of the game (de Voogt 2003). The fact that the two-row game is no longer played in Oman is an indication that the game departed with the Ottomans as it did, for instance, in Sudan (de Voogt 2012).

### Games in Arabia

The recent dating of the games at Jebel Jassasiyah (Qatar), at the most 250 years old, fits with the conclusion that the Omani graffiti games were left during the Ottoman Empire. The configuration in Dhofar at Shisr has been associated with the Abbasid period (eighth–thirteenth centuries AD) but has a board of fourteen cup-holes in three rows and is, therefore, more likely a tab game rather than a mancala game. Suggestions of an earlier presence of mancala in the Arab world are less likely in the absence of a game context or a tradition of such games for the given period. Games played in antiquity, such as the boards at Khor Rowri with five or six holes in two rows (J. Zarins,

personal communication; Anonymous 2007) more likely refer to the game of five lines (Schädler 1998) rather than a mancala game for which there is little evidence in Arabian antiquity. As mentioned earlier, a possible playing practice that included wooden boards or sand precludes any definite statement that mancala was absent in antiquity.

The introduction of board games by way of caravan merchants to the great Nabataean cities is an attractive idea but remains to be proven. The arrival of the Ottomans seems to fit with the introduction of the game of mancala to the coasts of Arabia, an introduction, which, in Dhofar, is likely to have operated through Yemeni sailors travelling between ports. The game was then abandoned after

the departure of the Ottomans. During the late nineteenth century, a period in which the Sultanate of Oman governed Zanzibar from Muscat, an African population arrived that introduced *hawalis*, the only mancala game known today in this region.

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