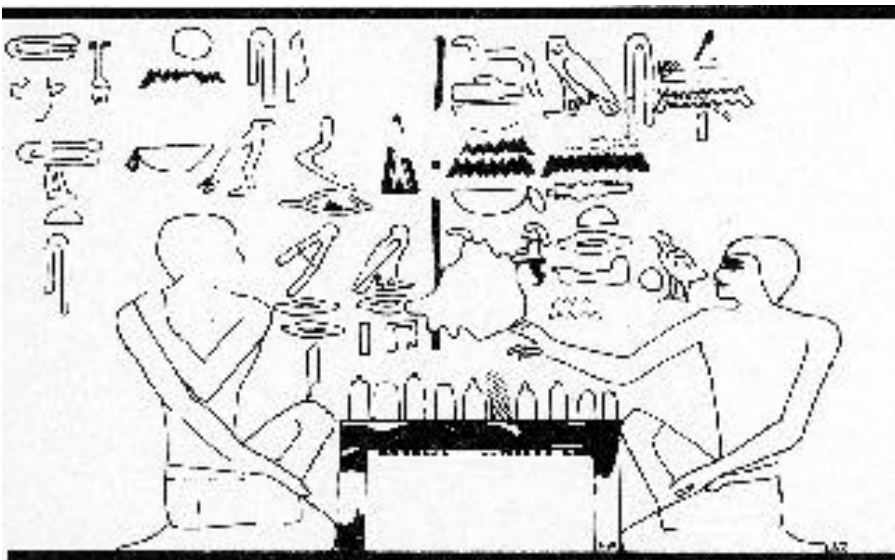


# In Search of the Meaning of Senet

by Peter A. Piccione ©



Wood and faience senet board belonging to the scribe Meryma'at, a contemporary of King Tuthmosis III, including draughtsmen and casting sticks. This gameboard was found in Abydos and dates to about 1500 B.C. Length, 39.8 centimeters.



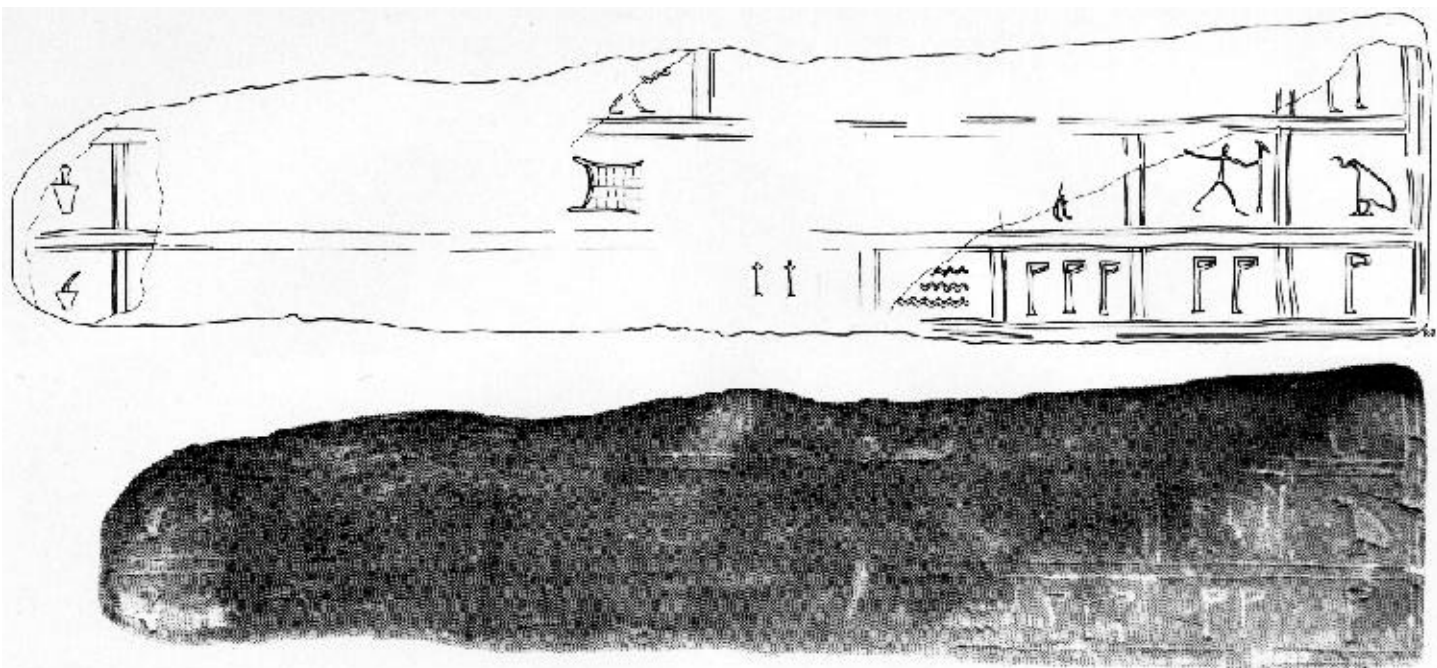
An Old Kingdom gaming scene from the tomb of Pepi-ankh at Meir dating to about 2300 B.C. shows two people playing senet. The player on the left says, "It has alighted. Be happy my heart, for I shall cause you to see it taken away." The player on the right responds, "You speak as one weak of tongue, for passing is mine."

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More than 5,000 years ago, the ancient Egyptians invented a board game almost as elaborate as anything from Parker Brothers today. Beginning simply as a form of recreation, this game was to evolve into a profound ritual, a drama for ultimate stakes. Called senet or "passing," the game was based on the movement of draughtsmen across a board consisting of 30 squares arranged into three parallel rows of ten squares each. Two contestants strategically maneuvered their teams of draughtsmen through these squares on the throw of dice-like casting sticks or bones, freely passing each other in an attempt to gain the position of final superiority at the edge of the board. For 3,000 years these players jockeyed for position until the advent of the Christian era when senet died out and its detailed rules passed into oblivion.

For almost a century, Egyptologists have struggled through fragmentary and

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Incised and painted wooden senet board with funerary decorations in the 13 surviving squares. Length, 34.5 centimeters

incomplete evidence in an attempt to decipher the long-lost rules of senet. Several far-fetched reconstructions of the game surfaced but eventually sank under the weight of newer archaeological information. Recently, however, after several years of study incorporating new data, I have been able to substantially reconstruct both the methods and larger meaning of senet, so that the game can be better understood and even played again today.

This research demonstrates that the stratagems of the game reflect nothing less than the stratagems of the gods, and that senet, when properly understood, can reveal essential Egyptian religious beliefs about the afterlife. At the most, the game indicates that ancient Egyptians believed they could join the god of the rising sun, Re-Horakhty, in a mystical union even before they died. At the least, senet shows that, while still living, Egyptians felt they could actively influence the inevitable afterlife judgment of their souls - a belief that was not widely recognized by Egyptologists.

Such an explanation of senet is possible only because of the extensive new evidence now available. The material includes a complete history of senet through an analysis of most surviving ancient gameboards and their decorations, annotated tomb representations, and new translations and interpretations of religious gaming texts that describe the journey of the soul through various regions of the afterlife as if it were moving across a senet board. The Egyptians believed that in death they would join the sun god on his bark as it set in the western horizon at dusk. The deceased and the sun god would then journey together through the subterranean regions of the underworld. Here dwelt a host of divinities and the souls of deceased

people who were judged for their sins and consequently rewarded or punished. The reward would be food, drink and eternal life with Ra, the sun god; the punishment, torture and eventual annihilation. This netherworld was usually represented as having 12 regions, one for each of the 12 hours of the night. After freely passing through the 12 hours of the netherworld, the fortunate souls would then unite and rise with Re-Horakhty into the eastern sky at dawn and become one with the sun god.

Senet was originally strictly a pastime with no religious significance. As the Egyptian religion evolved and fascination with the netherworld increased - reflected in such ancient works as the *Book of Gates*, *Book of What is in the Netherworld*, and portions of the *Book of the Dead* - the Egyptians superimposed their beliefs onto the gameboard and specific moves of senet. By the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty in 1293 BC, the senet board had been transformed into a simulation of the netherworld, with its squares depicting major divinities and events in the afterlife.

The first square in the upper left-hand corner, for example, was the "House of Thoth," the ibis-headed divinity shown as a bird perched atop a standard. Thoth is first on the board because he announced the arrival of the deceased into the court of judgment and arranged that the deceased be able to sail on a bark through the netherworld with the crew of Ra. Square 12, on the other hand, depicted the constellation Orion as a figure in a boat with his head turned backward. Orion was a manifestation of Osiris, god of the dead and ruler of the netherworld; Orion's rise into the night sky was thought to mirror Osiris' rise from the netherworld.

The "House of Repeating Life" - square 15 at the middle of the board, is represented as a frog, the Egyptian

symbol for resurrection, often shown sitting on the prow of the netherworld bark. Repeating life was a common epithet for deceased people and referred to the continuation of their lives after death; senet players falling on this square drew an extra turn. A pitfall, square 16 was called the "House of Netting" and meant a loss of turn. In the netherworld, sinners, the enemies of Ra, were entangled in executioners' nets, tortured and annihilated in pits of fire. In contrast, the "House of Rejuvenation," square 26, brought a free turn and was always desirable. In a double meaning, this square also referred to the mummy workshop where a body was prepared for burial, rejuvenation and, ultimately, eternal life.

Square 27 depicted the "Waters of Chaos" over which the netherworld bark floated as it rose into heaven at dawn. Sinners, denied a place in the bark, were drowned in these waters; thus, as the words of one gaming text aptly showed, square 27 was the ultimate senet pitfall: "I seize his game pieces so that he might drown together with his game pieces. I throw him into the water." Draughtsmen who landed on it had to be removed from the board.

The final square, 30, was that of Re-Horakhty, the name of the sun god as he rose into the dawn. By crossing this square with each of their pieces, players successfully completed the game of senet. But far more important, they ritually joined with the sun god while still alive and thus assured their survival of the ordeals of the netherworld even before dying. The departure of the senet pieces from the board was tantamount to nothing less than the deceased's passage out of the netherworld, union with Ra, and eventual deification.

Senet began as a strictly secular game and



its evolution can be analyzed in a practical as well as mystical sense. Historically, senet made its first known appearance in the Third Dynasty mastaba or tomb of Hesy-re, the overseer of the royal scribes of King Djoser at Saqqara, dating to approximately 2686 BC. Unidentified senet-like boards have also been found in Predynastic and First Dynasty burials at Abydos and Saqqara and date to about 3500-3100 BC. These and a number of First Dynasty (3100 BC) senet board hieroglyphs indicate that the game may be even older. Annotated depictions of people playing the game also appear on the walls of later Old Kingdom (2686-2160 BC) mastabas among other daily life scenes. These pictures and their captions show that senet was a game of position and strategy. Exceptionally skillful players could pass all seven of the opponent's pieces with all seven of their own; however, excavation of senet boards with accompanying casting sticks or knucklebones, which functioned as dice, indicates that winners also had to be lucky.

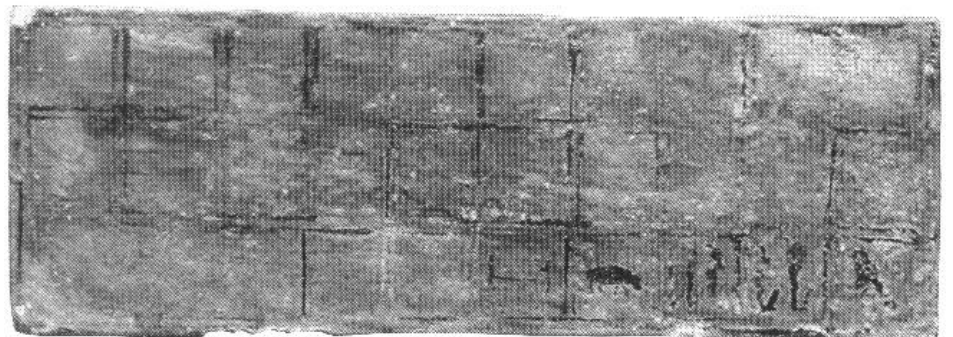
Analysis of gaming texts and various boards show that throughout senet's history, the direction of movement across the squares was boustrophedon - reversing direction in every row. Beginning on squares on the upper left, the object was to progressively move one's draughtsmen first to the five squares on the lower right and then from the board itself. Contestants vied initially for the first square and then to pass, move ahead, and even force their opponents backward, all with elaborate blocking maneuvers not unlike backgammon. Bonus squares which allowed free turns were placed on the board in key locations next to pitfall squares. The strategic occupation of these beneficial squares in conjunction with other blocking maneuvers would force the opponent into the pitfalls. One of which would later represent the netting of the netherworld executioners. In the plainest terms it also meant the loss of turn, and for the ultimate pitfall, the primeval Waters of Chaos, the loss of the draughtsman itself.

Although all of the almost 80 known senet boards have some decorated squares, only the last five squares - the ones that were the key to winning throughout the game's history - were consistently decorated since the earliest boards. During Old and Middle Kingdom times, these squares were inscribed with secular designs and numbers that meant simply "good", "bad", 3, 2 and 1. "Good" was a bonus; "bad" a pitfall; and the sequence 3, 2, 1 was the key to success. Never changing over 3,000 years, this sequence determined the movements of a piece in attempting to exit the board. To remove a piece from one of these last squares and so move off the board, a player required a throw of the sticks or bones equal to the value of the square the draughtsman was on.

During the Eighteenth Dynasty (1570-1293 B.C.) senet underwent some major changes. Each player used five draughtsmen instead of seven, and the game was built into a self-contained wooden box with a drawer to house the draughtsmen and casting sticks. One face of the board served as the senet



*Tomb painting of Sennefer, the mayor of Thebes, seated before his offering table. Placed beside him (seen under his chair) is a senet gaming box on its sledge-stand resting on top of an openwork stool.*



*Slab-style senet board with painted designs belonging to the priest of Amon, Nesyamonopet. The five squares on the lower right of this faience gaming board (bottom, right) have funerary designs and imply the religious aspects of senet. Length, 26.5 centimeters.*

**Photo Credits:**

- Figure 1, Gameboard of Meryma'at: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- Figure 3, Incised wooden senet board: British Museum, London
- Figure 4, Wall painting of Sennefer: Peter Piccione
- Figure 5, Slab-style senet board: Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore
- Figure 6, Wall painting of Nebenma'at: Peter Piccione



Wall painting in a Theban tomb shows Nebenma'at, "Servant in the Place of Truth," playing *senet* with his wife Meretseger. The text reads "sitting in the pavilion, playing *senet*, knowing three and finding two."

board, while the reverse side often bore a different game called *tjaw*. The ebony, ivory and gold gameboard found in the tomb of Tutankhamun is a particularly ornate example of this type of board. By the Eighteenth Dynasty, most boards were inscribed with the standard funerary offering formula, indicating that from this point on they were sometimes manufactured strictly for the tomb. In fact, most of the boards known from this period were found in tombs. Wall paintings in the tomb of the vizier Rekhmire in Thebes show a porter carrying a gameboard into his burial. Similarly, the mayor of Thebes, Sennefer, is shown with his board attending him in death.

Tomb paintings of people playing *senet* also underwent a striking change in the Eighteenth Dynasty. No longer included among the daily life scenes, they now appeared in a decidedly religious context of ritual scenes, some of which were from the *Book of the Dead*. The descriptive annotations or captions accompanying these paintings took on a similar change away from the practical and toward the religious. Tomb inscriptions at this time refer to the player as a deceased contestant playing in the necropolis against an invisible adversary - his own soul. This may explain why so many New Kingdom tomb paintings show seemingly opponentless *senet* players.

During the reign of Queen Hatshepsut (ca. 1498 BC), the famous female pharaoh, the decoration of some boards also began to evolve into what would ultimately become

clearly religious symbols. The 3-2-1 sequence became three birds, two men, one man, and the "bad" became a water trap. By the reign of King Seti I (1291-1279 BC) the "men" in these last squares became "gods" in a sequence of three, two and one god. By the Twentieth Dynasty (ca. 1185-1075 BC), these squares would also express direct supplications, modeled after writings on the netherworld, that the player might rise into heaven with Re-Horakhty.

At this time the increasingly mystical game also underwent another physical change. The boards were now painted or incised on a flat slab of stone, wood or faience and all contained religious decorations in the final five squares. Several contemporary Twentieth Dynasty gameboards have all 30 of their squares decorated with religious designs. Although now partially destroyed, enough details remain to show that they correspond exactly to the descriptions in the gaming texts. These boards, probably used in a ritual form, correspond with the development of religious gaming texts. In these texts, the player narrates in the first person the journey of his draughtsmen through the squares and the events which befall them there. Seemingly, then, those texts describe that ritual, if they are not the recitation of the ritual itself. We know that the mechanics of the game in the ritual derived from the older practical game, because so much of the descriptive material in the gaming texts has earlier

parallels in the Old Kingdom tomb scenes. One of these completely inscribed and surely religious boards was found buried in the courtyard of the Eighteenth Dynasty tomb of Kenamun at Thebes. But the board, now in the British Museum, dates to the Twentieth Dynasty and was thus interred more than 300 years after Kenamun was buried. The ritual importance of this board is implied not because it was a later burial addition, but because it was interred by itself without any associated corpse.

It is clear that *senet* had developed a deeply religious significance by this time. Yet some boards still retained strictly secular designs, such as those scratched into the Twenty-fifth Dynasty boat ramp of the quay of the Amon temple at Karnak. Thus, in the New Kingdom two forms of *senet* existed simultaneously: a secular recreational game played by two people and its offshoot, a ritual game probably performed by only one person.

As a game of skill, *senet* was undoubtedly exciting. But as a ritual game, it must have afforded ancient Egyptians great reassurance to act out and divine the afterlife and know they might still live with Ra in heaven after death no matter what sins they committed in life. Perhaps it was unnecessary even to perform the ritual game. The board itself may have had so much amuletic significance that just depositing one in the tomb might have been enough to ensure a happy afterlife with Ra.