In Search of the Meaning of Senet

by Peter A. Piccione ©

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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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 death they would join the sun god on his barks 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 deities 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 deities and events in the afterlife.

The first square in the upper left-hand corner, for example, was the "House of Rejuvenation," square 30, meaning 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
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,
much 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 Eight-
teenth Dynasty. No longer included among the
daily life scenes, they now appeared in a de-
cidedly religious context of ritual scenes, some
of which were from the Book of the Dead.
The descriptive annotations or captions ac-
companying 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
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
deeper religious significance by this time. Yet
some boards still retained strictly secular de-
signs, such as those scratched into the Twen-
ty-fifth Dynasty boat ramp of the quay of the
Amon temple at Karnak. Thus, in the New
Kingdom two forms of senet existed simultan-
eously: 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.