

Roman Board Game Pieces in Gonio-Apsaros
რომაული სამაგიდო თამაშები და გონიო-აფსაროსი

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Abstract: The present paper deals with the artefacts related to Roman board games found as a result of the archaeological excavations in Gonio-Apsaros fortification. It is widely known that there were many types of board games in ancient Rome and this is an indication of the popularity of board games in the Roman world, among all social classes. This fact is confirmed by the archaeological excavations carried out on Roman fortifications or places inhabited by Romans. Different types and shapes of board game pieces were discovered at these places which were related to board games. Roman culture, in our case the means of relaxation and entertainment was spread rapidly by Roman soldiers around the frontier regions of the empire. The round-shaped board game pieces discovered during the Gonio-Apsaros expedition are an indication of this. It is noteworthy to mention an ornament imprinted on a piece of pottery which might have the purpose of a game board. The discovery of items related to Roman board games in the Gonio-Apsaros area clearly suggests that during the rule of the Principate, the coastline of Colchis was under the influence of the Roman Empire, both economically and politically, as well as culturally. Researching Roman board games is significant because it keeps us closely connected to the daily life of Roman military units dislocated on the coast of Colchis. It also shows the power of the spread of Roman culture in the eastern Black Sea region.

Key words: Roman empire; Roman soldier; Roman board games; Gonio-Apsaros fortress.

თორნიკე მამისეიშვილი

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აბსტრაქტი: სტატიაში წარმოდგენილი და განხილულია გონიო-აფსაროსის ციხესიმაგრის ტერიტორიაზე უკანასკნელ წლებში ჩატარებული

არქეოლოგიური გათხრების შედეგად აღმოჩენილი არტეფაქტები, რომლებიც რომაულ სამაგიდო თამაშებთანაა დაკავშირებული.

ცნობილია, რომ ძველ რომში მრავალი სახეობის სამაგიდო თამაში არსებობდა. გართობის ეს მიმდინარეობა კი ყველა სოციალურ ფენაში თანაბარი პოპულარობით სარგებლობდა. ამას მოწმობს რომაული ციხესიმაგრეებისა თუ დასახლებული პუნქტების არქეოლოგიური შესწავლის დროს აღმოჩენილი სამაგიდო თამაშების დაფები, ქვები, ფიგურები თუ სხვა ატრიბუტები. რომაული კულტურა, ჩვენს შემთხვევაში განტვირთვისა თუ გართობის საშუალებები, ჯარისკაცების მეშვეობით სწრაფად ვრცელდებოდა საზღვრისპირა რეგიონებში. გონიო-აფსაროსის ციხესიმაგრეში აღმოჩენილი მრავალი ფორმის სათამაშო ქვები სწორედ ამის მიმანიშნებელია. ასევე ინტერესს იწვევს ჭურჭელზე დატანილი ორნამენტი, რომელსაც შესაძლოა სამაგიდო თამაშის დაფის დანიშნულებაც კი ჰქონოდა.

რომაულ სამაგიდო თამაშებთან დაკავშირებული ნივთების გონიო-აფსაროსის ტერიტორიაზე აღმოჩენა ნათლად გვიჩვენებს, რომ პრინციპატის მმართველობის დროს კოლხეთის სანაპირო ზოლი, რომის იმპერიის, როგორც ეკონომიკური და პოლიტიკური, ასევე კულტურული გავლენის ქვეშ იყო მოქცეული. აღმოჩენილი ნივთების შესწავლა კი კიდევ უფრო გვაახლოებს კოლხეთის სანაპიროზე დისლოცირებული რომაული სამხედრო შენაერთების ყოველდღიურობასთან.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: რომის იმპერია; რომაელი ჯარისკაცი; რომაული სამაგიდო თამაშები; გონიო-აფსაროსის ციხესიმაგრე;

Introduction: As a result of the Roman expansion in the 1st century AD, the coast of southwestern Georgia largely came under the political and economic influence of Rome. It was during this period that the fortresses built on the coastline of Colchis formed a defensive line known as "Limes Ponticus".

Gonio-Apsaros was one of the important fortresses in this defensive line. It was the strategic, political, economic and cultural center of the eastern boundary of Rome in the 1st – 3rd cc AD. According to Flavius Arrian, who traveled to this region in the year 132, five auxiliary cohorts were stationed here. There were around 1200-1500 soldiers in the cohorts which created a strong force.

In order to study city life, socio-economic conditions and cultural environment in Colchis during the Principate, considering materials discovered as a result of archeological excavations alongside the historical sources is significant for a comprehensive understanding of this region during that time.

Since 1994, archaeological excavations have been intensively carried out on the territory of the Gonio-Apsaros fortress, which revealed rich Roman cultural layers.

Scientists have been studying the traces of the Romans in the territory of Gonio-Apsaros for years.

In recent years, our attention has been drawn to the Roman board game pieces found here. Although this paper is the first attempt in this direction and the artifacts are few, studying Roman board games allows researchers to explore the social aspects of the soldiers and brings us even closer to the daily life of the garrison.

Methods: Traditional archaeological methods were used in the research, such as the method of historical source analysis and the method of comparative analysis of archaeological artifacts.

Discussion/Results: When thinking of Roman entertainment and recreation, the first thing that comes to mind is the arena, theater, baths, or circus. And least of all - board games, which had a prominent place in the daily life of Roman society.

There were many types of board games in ancient Rome, hence, boards and pieces were of different shapes. It is important to mention that their names and game functions differed (Nuțu, 2009: 145-156; Austin, 1934: 24-34; Merrill, 1916: 365-366; Bell, 1979: 30-35, 84-87, 91-92; Lanciani, 1892: 97-105; Court, 2021: 1-7; Schädler, 2001: 10-11; Schädler, 1998: 10-25; Kowalski, 2004: 2-25; Purcell, 1995: 3-37). All gambling games were forbidden by law except during the festive license of Saturnalia (17–19 December), but the laws were never rigidly enforced, and under many emperors were entirely disregarded (Bell, 1979: 35). During archaeological excavations of public buildings in Roman cities, game boards, scratched marble or stone slabs were found in almost all structures. The Romans used them to trick each other and win some money (Lanciani, 1892: 97). Roman Game boards and game pieces found in Roman tombs confirm the Romans' love of gambling (Whittaker, 2004: 297-299).

The first artifact that caught our attention was found during the summer expedition of 2020. It was discovered in the North of the fortress, specifically in the 37th square of the NW XII trench, in the Roman cultural layer of the II-III centuries. The round-shaped brown-clay artifact has a concavity in the centre and its diameter is 1.8 cm.

According to historical sources and archaeological materials, we know that Roman military units were camped in Gonio-Apsaros fortress for about three centuries (Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, 2021: 269-280; Mamuladze, 2002: 33-39). We can assume that above mentioned board game piece was owned by one of the soldiers. It is so primitive that it could have been made by him. Similar types of board game pieces were found in abundance on Roman monuments. As a result of archaeological excavations in Northern Dobrudja, which is located on the banks of the Danube, several round-shaped board game pieces with a diameter ranging from 1.7 to 2.2 cm were discovered. The material used for making these board game pieces was different. Bone, glass and clay were used in most cases (Nuțu, 2009: 151,156). A wooden game board was found along with medical instruments in the burial of a doctor in Colchester, East England. There were round white and blue board game pieces as well.

(Court, 2021: 5). Since we mentioned the primitive ways of creating board game pieces, one more thing has to be explained as well. Soldiers had neither the time nor the desire to make elaborate and valuable game pieces. All this happened due to their unstable service as well as the strict discipline obtained in the forts. Therefore, soldiers made game pieces from the available resources and besides, they scratched playing boards on the hard surface. The best example of this is the board game pieces found on the Northern slope of the Areopagus Hill in Athens, which were made from various types of pottery fragments (Kurke, 1999: 264).

There is another game piece that was found during the summer expedition of 2023. It was discovered near the brown-clay game piece that we have mentioned above. It was located in the same trench, but to be more precise, in 34th square. The game piece was made of stone in comparison with the brown-clay game piece and its diameter is 2 cm. There are traces of processing on the sides.

It is interesting to figure out for which specific game the board game pieces we found were used. Unfortunately, no game board of any type has been found in Gonio-Apsaros territory. However, judging by the universal shape of the game pieces, we may assume that they were possibly used in the process of playing most Roman board games.

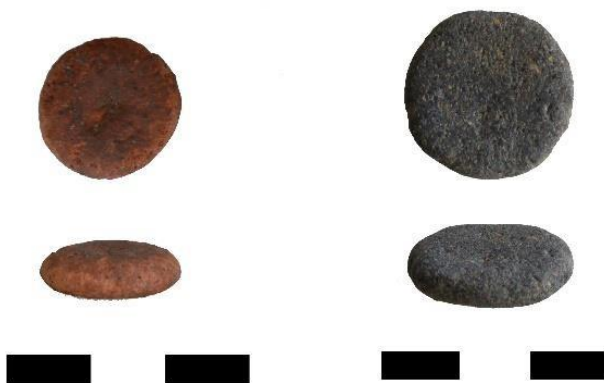


Fig. 1. Brown-clay and stone game pieces from the fortress of Gonio-Apsaros. Photo: G. Dumbadze

Considering the strict rules of the fortress, the soldiers might have avoided playing board games inside the fort at all. This is the reason why they used to visit the taverns in the settlement near the fortress. Although we have little information related to the daily life of garrison in Apsaros, Procopius provides us with interesting information about the castle. According to him: ‘This was a populous city in ancient times and a great wall surrounded it, while it was adorned with a theater, hippodrome, and all other

things by which the size of a city is commonly indicated. But now none of these is left except the foundations of the buildings (Dewing, 2014: 465)'. In the historical source, our attention is drawn to the theater and the hippodrome, which have not yet been revealed as a result of archaeological excavations. Although their existence already indicates that the forms of Roman entertainment were well known to the population of Apsaros castle. It is not surprising that a large city of this size would have many taverns, which was characteristic of most of the fortresses or castles in the Roman Empire. In their leisure time, the Romans used to play board games, the most popular means of entertainment at that time and Taverns were the best place to enjoy their time. The light of a lamp was noticeable in the taverns night after night and that was accompanied by the sound of rolling the dice.

Another item that caught our attention is a pottery fragment. It was found in 2017, southeast of the fortress., in the 60th square of the SO XIII trench, at the first construction horizon. The size of it is 10.3x15.2x1.7 centimeters. The surface of the brown-clay artifact is decorated with horizontal circles and scratched ornaments. That is the reason why it attracted us. It is this decoration of the artifact that piques our interest, as it closely resembles a game board. Boards of similar shape were used to play the Roman unknown board game 'Rota' or 'Terni Lapilli' (Merrill, 1916: 365; Kowalski, 2004: 20). A stone grid type board decorated with X ornament similar to the artefact discovered at Gonio-Apsaros was found at Milecastle, one of Hadrian's Wall forts in Great Britain. Scientists do not know whether such decorations were made specifically for the game or are just decorations (Court, 2021: 2). Therefore, we cannot say with certainty that the pottery fragment found in Gonio-Apsaros fortress had a gaming purpose.

In the territory of the fortress, where two board game pieces were found, one section of the bath was discovered during the 2023 expedition. It is represented as the remains of the underfloor heating system. The research and investigation continue in order to restore a complete picture of the mentioned section. However, the discovery of board game pieces near the baths further supports our opinion about the addiction of the Gonio-Apsaros fortress garrison to board games. As it is known, the baths were one of



the favorite places for the Romans to relax, unwind and have a good time. Here, along with various activities, they also enjoyed playing board games.

Fig. 2. Pottery fragment probably depicts a Roman board game board. Photo: G. Dumbadze

At first glance, the artifacts we have discussed seem insignificant with its little documentary value, however, studying the rules, boards and pieces of Roman board games is a unique way to get to know the culture of the ancient Romans. Along with this, we are able to get even closer to the daily life of the soldiers camped in the Gonio-Apsaros fortress.



Fig. 3. Aerial view of the NW XII trench, the newly discovered hypocaust system and the location of the board game pieces. Photo: T. Tsulukidze

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