

THE OSTRACON

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Rhonda K. Hageman

Senet, the Game of Passing

Rhonda K. Hageman

The average person, or even the average Egyptophile, when asked to name major features of ancient Egyptian culture, will certainly mention pyramids, mummies, hieroglyphs, and the Egyptian pantheon of gods and goddesses. However, one of the most ever-present and enduring elements of life in dynastic Egypt is little known outside Egyptology. This is the delightful board game known to the Egyptians as *snt*, here transcribed as *senet*.¹ The word *senet* is a form of the verb “to pass” (Kendall 1978, 4, note 2). This probably refers to the way in which the pieces move, passing through the 30 squares of the board and also passing the opponent’s pieces in order to be the first ones played off. However, in later periods, it may also have signified the ideal of passing safely through the anticipated dangers of the netherworld into a blissful afterlife.

HISTORY

It is known for a certainty that the pastime of senet is not only older than the pyramids, but older than the pharaohs themselves. Timothy Kendall, in his exhaustive work *Passing Through the Netherworld*, includes a photograph of a Predynastic game board with pieces, molded from dried mud, which was found in a grave at el-Mahasna in Middle Egypt (Kendall 1978, 7). As Egyptologist Jacques Kinnaer explains, “That this board game is of great antiquity is shown by its stylised representation as the hieroglyph *mn*, [the earliest occurrences of which are dated to the reign of the Horus Narmer, at the beginning of the Early Dynastic Period]” (Kinnaer 2004: 1). This glyph appears in the *nebti* name of the 1st Dynasty king, Hor-Aha, the same king whom Manetho identifies as “Menes” (*mn-n-ʿ*) (and who is also often identified as Narmer) in the first cartouche in the Kings’ List at Abydos (Fig. 2). The meaning of the bilateral hieroglyph *mn* is variously translated as “enduring”, “lasting”, or “permanent”, as in the names of the kings *Menkaure* and *Menkheperre Tuthmosis (III)*, as well as the city *Mennufer* (the Greek “Memphis”).

The meaning of the glyph *mn* becomes more significant in the later history of the game as a metaphysical concept representing the soul “enduring” and achieving a successful entrance into the afterlife. Moreover, the game is of such antiquity that it figures in one of the most well-known Egyptian creation myths, “Days Upon the Year.” In this story, Re refuses to allow the pregnant sky goddess, Nut, to give birth on any day of the 360-day year, in order to prevent the birth of any rivals to his exalted position. To remedy this, the god Thoth challenges the moon god, Khonsu, to play senet for the stake of some of the moon’s light. After many games, Thoth eventually wins from Khonsu (in some versions, the moon itself) enough light to create five additional “days upon the year”, making the full year 365 days. He gives these extra days to Nut, on which to bear her offspring: Osiris, Isis, Nephthys, Set, and Horus the Elder (Oakes and Gahlin 2003, 330–331). Clearly, the existence of this myth indicates the already universal appeal of

senet in the daily lives of the ancient Egyptians.

Although there are numerous pictorial representations of senet and people playing it, as well as a large number of complete or partial game boards and sets that have been discovered, “there exists no description of the rules, neither on papyrus nor on the walls of any tomb”². Apparently the game was so widely known among all levels of society that no one ever felt any need to write down the rules or method of play. Senet boards made of clay, stone, faience, ivory or wood were common grave goods from the earliest times (Kendall 1978, 1), even in the poorest graves, and the 30-square board layouts have been found scratched by workmen into the roofs of buildings and scrawled on the margins of schoolboys’ writing tablets (Kendall 1978, 22) in much the same way as modern schoolchildren draw up 3 X 3 squares for a quick game of tic-tac-toe.

The earliest known pictorial representation of senet is from the tomb of the 3rd Dynasty official, Hesyre, at Saqqara. In this image, painted on a wall, the board looks much the same as it would thousands of years later, with three rows of ten squares, four throwsticks, and seven rounded conical

pieces for each player, one set shorter than the other. The flat or half-rounded throwsticks, which the players used to determine the number of squares to move, were patterned or colored on one side and blank on the other side. These same features would remain fairly consistent throughout the history of the game although the game acquired certain metaphysical aspects in the Ramesside period and the dynasties that followed (see below).

PLAY AND DEVELOPMENT

Despite the lack of explicitly written game instructions, researchers have gleaned enough information from inscriptions accompanying illustrations of senet players to arrive at a fairly good idea of how this most ancient of board games was played. The number of blank or uncolored sides facing up after the sticks were thrown indicated the number of squares to move, from one to four. If the sticks fell with all four blank sides face-down, the players may have moved either five or six spaces. Interpretations of this rule vary; some researchers argue for five spaces and others for six. In either case, throwing four-faces-down seems to have allowed the player another throw, which was also true for throws of 1 and 4. Throws of 2 or 3 ended the player’s turn. Besides throwsticks, knucklebones were occasionally used to determine the number of squares to move; a number of known sets contain carved, imitation knucklebones in ivory. The number of spaces to move were determined by which surfaces of the bones faced upward when thrown or rolled, of which there were five possible combinations (Kendall 1978, 66–67). In general, most of the earliest senet boards, from the Old and Middle Kingdom periods, looked much like the diagram below (Fig. 3.).

The 30 squares were not played as a squared field as in chess or checkers, but rather as a path, shaped like a reversed letter ‘S’, from ‘1’ in the upper left to ‘30’ in the lower right. (The

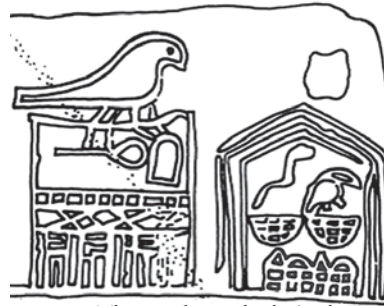


Fig. 1. The *mn* hieroglyph (at lower right) in the *nebti* name of Hor-Aha on an ivory label from the tomb of Queen Nithhotep (after Clayton 1994, 20).



Fig. 2. “Menes” from the Abydos King List

original boards were not numbered; numbers are used only in modern diagrams for the convenience of the reader). The players moved their pieces from left to right across the top row, from right to left across the middle row, and ended the game by moving from left to right across the bottom. Senet was a race game; like its distant descendant backgammon, its object was for the players to play all of their pieces along the designated path and off the board. The player who first played off all of his or her pieces first won the game.

Several squares on the board have special significance. The first marked square, Square 15, sometimes contains the hieroglyph *nfr* ♀ (life) or other markings, but is frequently unmarked in any

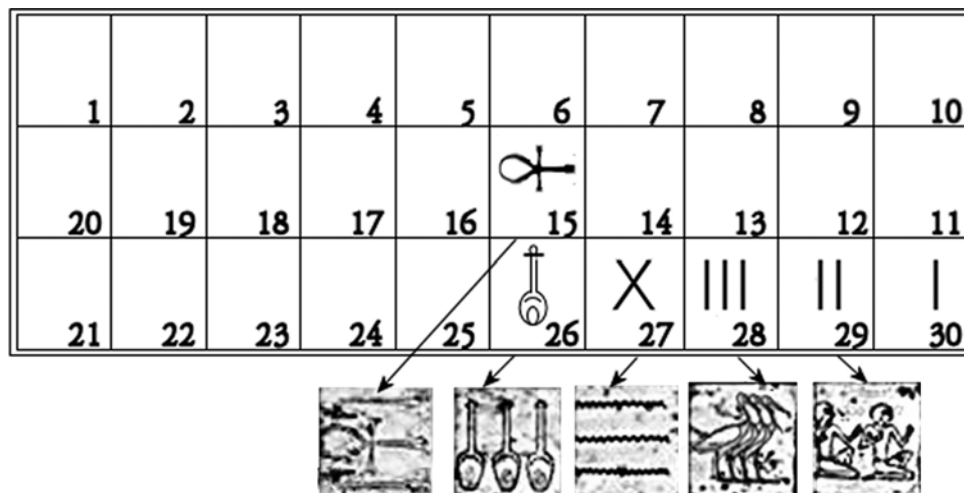


Fig. 3. Above: A senet board with numbered squares to indicate sequence of play. Squares 15 and 26-30 have special significance; see text. Below: Five designs for squares 15 and 26 through 29 similar to those on a senet board from Tutankhamun's tomb.

way. The last five squares are marked with characteristic symbols. Square 26 is traditionally marked with the hieroglyph *nfr* ♀ (good). Square 27 bears a large X, apparently a warning that this is a bad place to land. The final three squares are marked simply with three strokes, two strokes, and one stroke, indicating the throws necessary to play off one's pieces from those squares. Occasionally, the last square is designated by the sun-disk symbol ☉ instead of a single stroke; frequently it is simply left blank. This "simple" version of the board is found both in early representations and in later times.

The appearance of the six marked squares changed somewhat over time. By the beginning of the New Kingdom, the designs used to signify the important squares, or "houses", had become more elaborate, as seen in one of the senet sets found in the tomb of Tutankhamun³ (Fig. 3). In this set, Square 15 contains an *ankh*, but now it is framed by a pair of *was* scepters. Square 26, known by this time as the "Beautiful House", now contains not one but three *nfr* hieroglyphs, forming the plural *nfr.w* and changing the meaning from "good" to "beautiful" (Kendall 1978, 24). The name of this square is actually a play on words: the phrase *pr nfr.w* can read either "beautiful house" (as on a senet board) or "house of beautification", the latter being the mortuary where priests performed the rituals of mummification. As discussed below, that meaning became highly significant to the game in the later New Kingdom. Square 27, formerly marked with an ominous-looking X, now contains the hieroglyph for water, indicating what sort of danger awaits those who are unlucky enough to land there. The 'three' and 'two' squares are marked here with three birds and two human, male figures. The last square, Square 30, is unmarked in this set, but sometimes contained an image of Horus.

Not only did the markings on the squares vary from one set to another, but the design and style of the boards did as well. Ephemeral or incidental boards, intended to be used at the moment, were drawn on papyrus or scratched into the earth or handy stone surfaces. One step up from those were simple "slab-style" boards, made from a flat piece of wood or slab of clay. The most frequently found senet boards were in the form of boxes with a sliding drawer that held the pieces and the throwsticks. Both the slab-style and box-style senet boards often had boards for other games, such as the popular game of "twenty-squares", on the reverse side, so turning the board over presented the other playing surface (Kendall 1978, 20; fig. 14).

These double-surfaced game boxes, two of which were among the items found in Tutankhamun's tomb, were so common in the Second Intermediate Period and the New Kingdom that modern historians have occasionally confused the two games.⁴ The most elaborate senet boards were in the form of free-standing tables with legs ending in ornately carved lion's paws. A magnificent example of this type (Fig. 4) was found in the tomb of Tutankhamun, who must have been an avid devotee of the game since he was buried with no fewer than four sets.

The game pieces used to play senet were as varied as the boards on which it was played. Frequently, the playing pieces are shown as simple, rounded cones, with one set taller than the other. Other sets are depicted with one opponent's pieces in the

shape of tall, rounded cones and the other having short, squat pieces shaped like spools or barrels. An elegant set once belonging to the 18th Dynasty pharaoh Hatshepsut has carved wooden pieces in the form of lion's-heads, each bearing her cartouche, "Maatkare," on top of its head (Kendall 1978, 18 and 25; figs. 13 and 19).

To play the game, the players apparently arranged their pieces alternately across the first row of the board, although some versions of the rules hypothesized by scholars have the players "rolling" themselves onto the board one piece at a time, as permitted by throws of the sticks. As described earlier, throwing the sticks or knucklebones determined how many spaces a player could move. Whereas in chess or checkers enemy pieces are captured and removed from play altogether, in senet opposing pieces exchange positions but remain in play on the board. In other words, if a player's piece lands on a space occupied by the opponent's piece, the opponent's piece is moved to the space from which the other player's piece originated.⁵ If a player has two pieces on adjoining squares, those pieces are protected, and may not be displaced by an opponent, although an opposing piece may pass around them by a high enough throw, and continue along the path toward the end. Three pieces belonging to the same player on adjoining squares form a block; they can be neither displaced nor passed. The opponent's pieces are held up behind this block until the player chooses to break it up.

The players roll or throw the sticks until they get a throw of 2 or 3, at which point their turn ends and they move their pieces in accordance with the throws they have accumulated during that turn. A few lucky throws can change the situation of the game very quickly. The use of throwsticks rather than dice weights the odds; it gives a higher probability of throwing 2 or 3, and a much smaller chance

of getting the high-value throws of 1, 4, or 5/6. Playing *senet* with a modern six-sided die, with which the odds of rolling any particular number from 1 to 6 are equal to the odds of rolling any other number, drastically alters the character of the game.

As the players move along the board path, various obstacles arise in addition to those posed by the opponent's pieces. It seems to have been a rule that all pieces must land on Square 26, the "Beautiful House", by exact count before being allowed to continue on to the last squares and be played off the board. At this point, the game becomes more difficult and dramatic. Rolling a 1 from Square 26 would land the player in the "hazard" Square 27, indicated by an X on the simpler boards or by the symbol for water on later examples. Therefore, we can surmise that this is why the roll of 1 allowed the player to roll again, and to continue accumulating throws of the sticks or bones until getting a 2 or a 3, and only then to move the pieces. This made it fairly infrequent that a player would be forced into landing a piece on Square 27. From this square, the player, who has "drowned" in the water, has a choice of moving that piece to Square 15, the square associated with rebirth and decorated with an ankh or other symbols of regeneration, or of waiting to roll a 4 to get out of the water. As long as that piece remains "in the water", no other pieces can be moved and are not considered protected (Kendall 1978, 65). If the player successfully avoids landing in the Nile in Square 27, he or she then moves onto one of the squares designated with the numbers 3, 2, or 1. From here the player can only move pieces off the board by an exact throw of the needed number; if that number is not thrown and there are no other pieces on the board (or none that can be moved legally), then the player is forced to move the piece backwards the indicated number of spaces. Therefore, one may be forced by the throw of the sticks to land in Square 27 if there is no other legal move available.

SENET AS A FUNERARY METAPHOR

As the play of *senet* continued into the 18th Dynasty, it began to acquire a deeper and more mystical, or metaphysical, significance that it had not possessed earlier. While remaining a popular pastime, it also became (at least among the higher classes) a metaphor for the deceased person's successful journey and entry into the afterlife. A number of features of the ordinary gameplay naturally led to this supernatural interpretation of the game and its meaning: 1) the designation of Square 26 as *pr nfr.w*, the "Beautiful House"—or the house of mummification; 2) the fact that players are required to land on Square 26 before finishing their path around the board (which mirrors the Egyptian belief that the dead must be mummified in order to achieve immortality); and 3) the depiction of the *senet* board as a hieroglyph meaning "to endure" or "to persevere". The object of the game, which is to endure all the obstacles and be able to leave the playing surface, reflects the goal of each person in Egyptian society: to endure or persevere in the danger-fraught passage through the netherworld and finally achieve immortality in an eternal paradise.

In accord with this broader and deeper concept of what the game symbolized, the game board itself also developed in a new direction. Until the middle of the 18th Dynasty, the standard board design was similar to Fig. 3, with the *nfr.w* glyphs in Square 26, the "water" in Square 27, and 3 – 2 – 1 on the last three squares. As the game acquired this secondary, funerary significance in the late 18th and 19th Dynasties, each of the 30 squares of the board was inscribed or painted with motifs and images that reflected this metaphor of



Fig. 4. A *senet* board from Tutankhamun's tomb

death-and-rebirth (Kendall 1978, 28–33). For example, on a few 19th Dynasty boards, Square 15 contained the drawing of a frog, representing rebirth and the goddess Heket (Kendall 1978, 32).

Moreover, as the Egyptians' concept of the meaning and purpose of the game shifted towards a funerary paradigm, the character of *senet* as portrayed in tomb paintings and papyri (such as the Book of the Dead) also changed. Prior to the mid-18th Dynasty, the tomb owners, if they were particularly avid players, had themselves depicted in their tombs playing *senet* with various friends or relations, often accompanied by captions explaining how well the game was going. However, as the concept of winning at *senet* evolved into a metaphor (or even a magical formula) for successfully attaining the afterlife, the tomb paintings began to depict the tomb owner playing alone against some invisible, unseen adversary. There are two well-known examples of this style of painting: the portrayal of Ani with his wife as he is playing *senet* in the Papyrus of Ani, and the wall painting from the tomb of Nefertari (Fig. 5). Like Ani, Nefertari is seated alone at the gaming table, playing for her soul's destiny against her unseen opponent. The identity of this adversary is not known; whether it is one of the 42 gods or goddesses addressed in the Negative Confession, or Osiris himself, or some other unnamed entity, is never indicated.

Given the association of the funerary form of *senet* with the gods and the attainment of the afterlife, it would be interesting to determine whether *senet* was played in this way, or only in its original form as an amusing pastime, or if it were banned altogether during the reign of Akhenaten. The fact that Tutankhamun was an enthusiastic player is not necessarily significant; he could have been introduced to the game in his boyhood once he had left Akhetaten and returned to Thebes. It would be a logical assumption that *senet*, in its religious aspect, would be directly at odds with Akhenaten's belief in the Aten as the single god, which is indirectly supported by the lack of representation of this game in the Amarna tombs.⁶

LATE DEVELOPMENTS

The funerary form of *senet* seems to have been a fairly short-lived phenomenon. During the reign of Taharqa, the older, simpler form of the board motifs seems to have been revived (Kendall 1978, 39). However, as time passed and the Egyptians were increasingly governed by outsiders, knowledge and understanding of its play and meaning seemed to fade. There are some very odd and garbled descriptions in Greco-Roman writings of a game which must have been *senet* but which was only dimly understood by the writers attempting to describe it. Finally the game disappeared entirely;



Fig. 5. Queen Nefertari plays senet in a scene from her tomb (after Clayton 1994, 148).

the last known reference to it is in the tomb of an official named Petosiris, in the fourth century A.D. (Kendall 1978, 38–43).

SENET IN THE MODERN AGE

Modern game addicts owe a considerable debt to the Egyptologists and historians who have done a great deal of work to revive interest in, and awareness of, this very ancient game. Among these are Timothy Kendall, Gustave Jéquier, John Tait, Edgar Pusch, and R.C. Bell, all of whom have formulated various versions of the rules by which senet was played.

However, the greatest momentum currently driving interest in senet must certainly be the Internet and electronic media in general. Although Timothy Kendall's excellent work, *Passing Through the Netherworld*, introduced many fans of senet to the game (the present author included), it has long been out of print and the only way to locate it is to find a used copy of the funerary-style senet set (also called *Passing Through the Netherworld*) with which it was distributed and sold. In contrast, there are now a myriad of websites and Internet documents explaining the history and rules of senet, and often containing images of playing boards which can be printed and used in actual play. A cursory search on the Internet for senet sites leaves one with the impression that a renaissance is underway for this long-lost pastime.

For those who lack a handy opponent, a number of websites exist that contain Java-enabled or other programs that allow online play against a server, or play against one's own computer once the software has been installed. The earliest of these (and among the more difficult to play) was created by programmer and archaic-games collector, P.S. Neeley. His site includes not only senet (using Professor Tait's version of the rules), but its cousin "twenty-squares", the Norse game Halatafl, and many other ancient games that have been nearly lost to history. In addition, the German children's search engine and game site, Blinde Kuh (www.blinde-kuh.de), created by Birgit Bachmann and Stefan R. Muller, contains an online senet game, albeit slightly simplified to be played by children. The British Museum also has an online Shockwave version, intended to be played by two human players, or by one player who plays both sides.⁷ At one time, Discovery Channel had an excellent online senet game

on its website, but it was subsequently removed. However, the game was included in an educational CD produced by Discovery Channel entitled *Nile: Passage to Egypt*. If one can find a copy of the CD, the game is embedded within the "Journey up the Nile" motif of the CD, in the section related to Abu Simbel. It is, in this author's opinion, among the best electronic versions of senet that has been produced, barring the accompanying soundtrack which consists of an unseen "Re" taunts and belittles the player in stentorian tones at every turn.⁸ Finally, there even exists a version written for the Palm Pilot, which is quite well-done and enjoyable to play.⁹ In addition to these actual games, there are a multitude of online references and links about senet, many of which duplicate information from sites listed in the References below. A large number of these are found on education-oriented sites and targeted at schoolchildren learning about ancient Egypt. If senet has a future, it may very well lie with the young people learning about it now in their social studies curricula.

Exploring the game of senet provides a glimpse into the life, attitudes and culture of dynastic Egypt, and offers an opportunity to understand and enjoy a pastime that surely delighted the ancient Egyptians at all levels of society. As Timothy Kendall states (1978, 6), "As we throw the sticks, move our pieces through the thirty "houses" of the board, and hope for victory, we may keep in mind—and be touched with awe—that through some forty centuries all of the greatest figures in Egyptian antiquity are almost certain to have played this game in much the same way and to have hoped for the selfsame victory."

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Also referred to in various sources as *senat* or *senit*.
- ² Kantz, Markus. "Senet, das 30-Felder-Spiel". *Senet, ein altägyptisches Brettspiel*. page 1 (translation mine). Herr Kantz's Senet page shows images of several modern senet sets available from various manufacturers in Europe, and he includes the makers' addresses.
- ³ It is interesting to note that the commercial set that is currently available under the name "Senat" uses this identical board design.
- ⁴ This confusion is not uncommon, as the two games were played with the same pieces on similar boards. For example, the small and elegant 17th Dynasty game box on display as part the *Quest for Immortality: Treasures of Ancient Egypt* exhibit (catalog page 156) is identified both in the catalog and in exhibit signage as a senet board when in fact the playing surface visible in the photo and while on display is a board for twenty-squares. (Whether there is, in fact, a thirty-square playing surface on the other side of the box is unknown). In addition, *Egypt: Land of the Pharaohs* in the *Lost Civilizations* series by Time-Life shows a "senet" board of the box type on page 139; close inspection reveals that it, too, is a board for twenty-squares and not for senet.
- ⁵ This may be the origin of the "hit" move in backgammon (considered by many to be a descendant of senet), in which a player's lone piece is landed on by an opposing piece and displaced to the raised bar across the center of the board. The player must then roll dice until throwing a number that allows that piece back into play.
- ⁶ There are no Amarna-period depictions of senet of which this author is aware.
- ⁷ http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk/life/activity/act_main.html
- ⁸ This is amusing once, possibly twice, after which it becomes obnoxious. Fortunately, the "mute" control solves this problem.
- ⁹ <http://www.rogame.com/pages/SenetDeluxe.html>. This version is well worth playing, and has caused the present author to miss a bus stop on more than one occasion.

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