

Game Parlours or Incidental Etchings? Material Traces of Incised Boardgames in Ancient South Asian Communal Spaces

Adrija Mukherjee

The Centre For Studies In Social Sciences, Calcutta

adrija.mukherjee@cssscal.org

Keywords

Incised, boardgames, graffiti, etched, spatial clustering, communal spaces, archaeological sites, material history, analogue games, history of games

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While games suggest the presence of social activity, board games in particular have had a long and presence in human history. Early excavated examples include the Royal Game of Ur or the Game of Twenty Squares from Mesopotamia (2600–2400 B.C.) and *Senet* from Egypt (1390–1353 B.C.), followed by a long legacy of boards ranging from those of antiquity to modern forms. Ancient boards were crafted in materials such as wood, bone, ivory, and various semi-precious stones. Beyond portable boards, however, another widespread material trace of early play cultures appears in incised graffiti boards, etched onto stone floors, walls, and open platforms in both religious and secular spaces. These include *Alquerque* games, Mancala cupule rows, race games, Morris or other alignment games, and multiple other variants. Their permanence and visibility set them apart, offering material evidence of social practices that unfolded repeatedly in shared spaces across sites around the world. According to scholars Alex de Voogt, Maria Nilsson and John Ward, ‘such graffiti game boards in most contexts have not only attested to human presence in different historical periods but, in some cases, have also assisted in dating an archaeological context’ (de Voogt, Nilsson, and Ward 2020). However, as noted by archaeologist and games scholar Barbara Care, ‘contextualizing these (graffiti boards) items chronologically and culturally remains a critical issue, and their interpretation is often controversial’ (Care 2022).

Rather than tracing chronology alone or treating boardgame etchings as isolated marks of recreation, this research also explores how such carvings exhibit continuity in form, function, and spatial placement. Their recurrence in shared, accessible public

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

spaces suggests that these markings operated as material infrastructures of society, expressing collective identity across centuries. The study also examines their proximity, clustering, and multiplicity, arguing that the abundance of incised games within a single site reflects not just the presence of play traditions but deeper patterns of material continuity, cultural transmission, and community engagement. These engravings often appear in dense clusters, sometimes comprising dozens of different kinds of games within a confined area, which may suggest repeated gathering, interaction, and shared practice both geographically and across time.

At (Vijayanagara) Hampi, games scholar and archaeologist, Elke Rogersdotter (2015) documents over nine hundred and sixty-five boards of multiple variants spread across market streets and temple platforms. The continuity of etching boards to play games both on stone slabs and on soil is also evident from colonial anthologies documenting board games across India by various anthropologists and geologists (see Ray & Ghosh 1999). Recent documentation by Project Kheliya in India reveals archaeological sites containing board games of multiple variants spread across the subcontinent. A digital archive of Ancient Indian Boardgames under the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC), and the JPN Centre for Excellence, IIT Indore, also documented, geotagged, and mapped locations of incised graffiti games at various sites in South Asia while exploring their possible play traditions through ethnographic inquiry, providing insights into their spatial distribution and forms of play (indiaboardgamesarchive 2025).

Comparable patterns appear far beyond South Asia. At Gebel el-Silsila in Egypt, de Voogt, Nilsson, and Ward documented numerous graffiti boards carved into quarry surfaces, suggesting habitation and the transmission of games across three periods along trade routes (de Voogt et al. 2020). In Athens, Care (2022) records game boards carved into public pavements and civic spaces, correlating material culture with communal space based on the function of play. Incised boards have been similarly recorded in preliminary field research from sites such as Ellora, Ajanta, Khajuraho, and many others across South Asia, revealing that both sacred and shared public spaces have long been sites of interaction and gathering, with games serving as tools of expression and material culture. These games, although varying in their ludic elements, often appear in striking proximity. For example, in the Kailasa temple of Ellora, an area identified as a fire altar contains an incomplete 8×8 *Ashtapada* or checkers grid, a race game of *Tablan*, an Alquerque game of Tigers and Goats, and multiple Mancala cupules on the floors. Despite belonging to different gaming traditions and modes of play, they occur within the same compact space. The carved surfaces or 'sites of memory' thus may have functioned as 'game parlours' of the past which could be suggested as socially inclusive for community engagements.

Despite widespread presence across cultures worldwide, incised or graffiti board games remain a significantly under researched area. This study therefore draws on primary field investigations in various sites of South Asia focusing on documentation of the games individually, analyzing the patterns and styles of similar games in a confined space, and a comparative analysis from global contexts to examine the

spatial clustering and material culture of carved game surfaces. Rather than attempting to fix these markings within strict chronology, given the difficulties of dating such engravings, this research aims to emphasize continued lived traditions of etching boards to play a game, and also considers how material traces of play may reflect recurring patterns of communal expression across centuries.

REFERENCES

Care, Barbara. 2022. 'Pavement Designs and Game Boards from Public Spaces of Ancient Athens: A Review Across the Board.' *Board Game Studies Journal* 16 (1): 225–249.

de Voogt, Alex, Maria Nilsson, and John Ward. 2020. 'The Role of Graffiti Game Boards in the Understanding of an Archaeological Site: The Gebel el-Silsila Quarries.' *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 106 (1): 129–148.

Ray, Nirbed, and Amitabha Ghosh. 1999. *Sedentary Games of India*. Kolkata: Asiatic Society.

Rogersdotter, Elke. 2015. 'What's Left of Games Are Boards Alone: On Form, Incidence, and Variability of Engraved Game Boards at Vijayanagara (c. AD 1350–1565).' *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 3: 457–496.

Ancient Indian Board Games Archive. 2025. *Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC) and JPN Centre for Excellence, IIT Indore*. <https://www.indiainboardgamesarchive.in/omkas/s/ancientindianboardgames/page/home>