

## GAME BOARDS AT VIJAYANAGARA<sup>1</sup>

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During our mapping of Vijayanagara, we recorded many hundreds of game boards. They occurred as pecked figures or rows of pits on bedrock and on the basements of structures. While we did not systematically make measured drawings of these boards, we photographed and sketched many of them. This paper reports on the types and context of boards that we discovered. We hope that it will encourage additional studies to analyse variation in the form and distribution of different types of boards at Vijayanagara. Students of games will be interested to know that the inhabitants of this imperial capital in southern India found time to practice these exercises in chance and strategy.

We are not the first to notice game boards at Vijayanagara. Some 40 years ago, P. Sadanandan published a highly pertinent article, in which he grouped thirteen documented board patterns as follows: "These play boards can be widely divided into three types, played with cowrice [*sic*], without them and with seeds" (Sadanandan 1963-64: 67).<sup>2</sup> He also noticed locations at which such boards were observed. More recently, Allan Smith, a member of our Project, published an example of a Race Board (Smith 1999).

### Frequency of Game Boards

Between 1983 and 1996, we documented 267 map sheets in whole or part, on which we recorded 769 boards; these were indicated by the symbol "g".<sup>3</sup> The frequency of boards per sheet ranges from 0 to 31; the average is 2.9 (standard deviation is 5.43). Table 1 presents summary statistics for each zone within the site, which indicates that game boards are most

frequent in zones where the most permanent structures were built, notably, the Royal and Sacred Centres. Overall, the frequency distribution of the occurrence of boards per sheets conforms to a "J"-shaped curve: 125 sheets contain no boards, 45 contain 1, 26 contain 2, 13 contain 3, 9 contain 4, and 6 contain 5. The long tail of the curve rises and falls with modes at 6 boards per sheet (10 cases), 10 (4), and 13 (6). It rises at the end with 25 boards per sheet (2 cases), 26 (1), 28 (2), and 31 (2). This indicates that almost half the sheets (46.5%) have no boards at all; of the remainder, many sheets have a few boards. It is striking that a few sheets have dense concentrations. Detailed analysis of their context may clarify their cultural meaning. We note that these high concentrations occur equally in the Sacred and Royal Centres.

### Context of Game Boards

Game boards at Vijayanagara are found in two contexts: on exposed bedrock and on stone basements of structures. Local granite is exposed in the form of boulders and wide outcrops or sheets. Boulders were quarried to form the blocks, slabs and columns out of which many structures in the city were built. Today, boulder-strewn ridges give a fantastic quality to the natural landscape. However, in the past – at least in the more densely settled areas of the city – these ridges and outcrops were engulfed by structures. Buildings of blocks and rubble were constructed on, under and against outcrops, while open areas were created within and between buildings. We have identified paths, plazas and work areas on this exposed bedrock.

While we have not analysed the range of

contexts of game boards on bedrock, one kind of location stands out: a horizontal or slightly sloping surface on an elevation overlooking a wide area, usually sheltered from the sun by a large boulder. The granite surface is pitted, abraded and polished, all of which indicate intensive use. One or several boards may occur, and when more than one is found together they may be of several types. We may speculate that those who played games here were required or chose to sit in these lookout points for some time.

Most game boards on structures occur in places where we may infer behaviour similar to that just described. Buildings were often constructed on elevated basements. In buildings that are more important the outer face of these platforms consisted of several stone courses: pillars or piers of wood, stone or masonry rested on or just inside the top course. Most of this horizontal course – usually a broad stone slab – was covered by walls of stone masonry or rubble, which filled in between vertical elements. However, it was exposed in entries and on long verandahs. While basements, floors, walls and ceilings were covered with plaster, it must have worn away or have been omitted on upper basement courses where these were subjected to heavy traffic.<sup>4</sup> It is on the upper surface of such courses that game boards are found. We see them less frequently on staircases of stone slabs, which lead to basements.

Game boards occur in gateways, open verandas, open halls and entryways, all of which are associated with temples and civic buildings. In such sheltered locales, guards and petitioners waited, and travellers, pilgrims and servants rested.

### **Forms of Game Boards**

Game boards are either line figures faintly or deeply etched or pecked, or rows of shallow or large pits pecked into the stone. Boards with pits may consist of two parallel lines each with seven shallow basin-shaped holes; occasionally an additional hole is present at each end of the figure. Also common is a rectilinear meander; less frequent is a design consisting of five pits, one each at the corner of a small square and one in the centre. Line figures are more varied:

triangles (sometimes with wings), squares (sometimes with triangular additions), rectangles, crosses consisting of four rectangles, and rectilinear meanders similar to those made with pits. Some boards are too faint or too incomplete to identify.

### **Identification of Games**

Although Vijayanagara was sacked in 1565 and the site has largely been deserted since, a large number of pilgrims and tourists still visit the ruined city. Agricultural workers and pastoralists also cross the site and shelter under boulders. We cannot therefore be sure that all the game boards we record were made during Vijayanagara times. However, the weathering of the exposed boards and the consistency in types of locations lead us to believe that most date to before 1565.

We have identified no gaming pieces at the site. In the absence of association of particular kinds of pieces with particular kinds of boards, our identifications must be somewhat more tentative.<sup>5</sup> We must assume that seeds, stones or even cowries were used, and these may have been of different sizes.

We have identified the games referred to below with the help of H.J.R. Murray (1952) and Dr Irving Finkel (British Museum, personal communication, 2001). Undoubtedly, various names for each game can be discovered in south Indian languages; however, here we use the names ascribed by Murray:

### **War-games and Hunt-games**

Three differing variations of the Alquerque board are illustrated here as Figures 1a-c, of which Figure 1a is also illustrated in Murray (1952: Fig. 29)<sup>6</sup> (Plate 1). Boards shown in Figures 1b and 1c differ in the number of wings and the number of routes on the wings.

While there are four examples of an eight by eight chessboard at the site, there is no cross-cutting of squares<sup>7</sup> (Plate 12). Smaller square grids may be incomplete examples of other types of boards; we have noted three examples of a two by two grid and two examples of a four by four grid.

There are also examples of the blockade game, which has only five points, notably, the

four corners and the intersection (Figure 1d, Plates 2, 10; see also Plate 3). Murray notes a related game, Do-Guti, played in the Punjab (1952: 92).

The Leopard game, played on a triangular board, is another type of hunt-game found at Vijayanagara. A version occurs here that is even simpler than one recorded by Murray (1952: 106): it consists of a triangle in which two routes intersect (Figure 2a). A more complex version consists of two horizontal and one vertical route (Figure 2b).<sup>8</sup> A version with a square at the apex of the triangle (Figure 2d, Plate 4) is not found in Murray. The board shown in Figure 2c and Plate 5 is still used for play in the area, and is now called Goats and Tigers.<sup>9</sup> Villagers associate boards 2a-c with a game known as Huli-name, or Tiger's Home.

#### Race Games

We have observed many variants of the single-track race-game at the site. Two types (Figures 3a and 3b, Plates 6-8) are also illustrated by Murray (1952: 140 A and F; see also Smith 1999: 42). As with Murray's examples of these types, in some boards at Vijayanagara there are cross-cut safe squares. We have recorded other cases of single-track race games, but the number of squares between turns is not standardized.

Several examples of boards with three rows and columns numbering from four to fourteen have been observed. Most frequent are three by eight grids (four cases).

There are also four cruciform game-boards, a version of Chaupati or Parchisi (Figure 4, Plate 9). This is the only board observed for a game that can be played by more than two people (here, four can play). The illustrated board may not have been completed; the cells in the southern arm have not been cross-cut.<sup>10</sup> This board is one of a cluster of games in and near Shiva temples on Hemakuta hill, which today is an easily accessible and popular viewpoint in the Sacred Centre.<sup>11</sup> Local informants know this game as Chadruanga.<sup>12</sup>

#### Games of Alignment

The game of larger Merels known commonly

as Nine Men's Morris is also widespread (Figure 5, Plate 10).<sup>13</sup> We have not seen the simpler versions of Merels game boards.

#### Mankala Games

Murray writes: "Anthropologists use the term Mankala for any similar game played in which the patterns of lines or cells usual for board-games is replaced by two, three or four rows of holes deep enough to contain a number of pieces at the same time" (Murray 1952: 158; see also De Voogt 1997). The Mankala game-boards at Vijayanagara consist of two rows of seven holes and may have trays at either end to hold the pieces not in use (Figure 6, Plate 11). Local residents named the associated game "channamane".<sup>14</sup>

#### Frequency of Types of Game Boards

Examination of the frequency of different types of boards in Table 2 indicates that Race games are most frequent (29% of identified boards) followed by Merels (19%), Alquerque (16%), Mankala (12%), Hunt (11%), Blockade (10%) and Grids (4%). (Total percentage is greater than 100% due to rounding.) These figures are tentative. We did not sketch most unidentified boards, but presumably, many could be identified during future research. This might change the relative proportion of boards.

There is variation in the proportion of boards in different zones of the city. For example, there are many more blockade and hunt games in the Sacred Centre than in the Urban Core or Royal Centre, and there are somewhat fewer Race games in the first than in the latter two. Conclusions about the statistical and cultural significance of such differences await future research.

#### Summary

We have briefly described several types of game-boards recorded at Vijayanagara. Their frequency and the often high concentration of boards indicates that where ever people had to wait or spent time, there was a "built-in" game board for them to play on.

## Notes

1. A longer version of this paper was accepted in 2001 for a collection of papers edited by Dr Irving Finkel to be published by the British Museum Press. We are greatly indebted to Finkel for editorial improvements and several footnotes incorporated here, drawn from his profound knowledge of the subject.
2. Thierry Depaulis has kindly drawn our attention to this important article.
3. We have not yet documented the stone surfaces and pavements of the oldest and largest temple complex in the Sacred Centre, dedicated to Virupaksha; here we will find many additional game boards.
4. When local staff played Goats and Tigers (see below) during our 1991-92 season, they scratched the board onto concrete with a stone, much as with hopscotch grids in American and English schools today. This form of game board would have survived weathering only in particularly sheltered areas. We can speculate that many more boards were drawn or scratched on plaster surfaces now vanished. As well, it is likely that portable boards in wood or metal were used. Thus, game boards were probably much more numerous than our survey indicates.
5. For example, hunt games and war games can both be played on variants of Alquerque boards but are distinguished by the different number of pieces employed.
6. Figure 1 here is Sadanandan 1963-64: Fig. 12; his Fig. 11 is a slight variant in which the external triangles have curved edges.
7. Sandanandan (1963-64: Fig. 9) illustrates this chess-type board, which he categorises, surely incorrectly, as a game with cowries. It is worth pointing out that chess is the only game among those represented in this survey that has to be played with "imported" pieces, rather than with improvised bits and pieces readily to hand.
8. Figure 2b here is Sadanandan 1963-64: Fig. 6.
9. Figure 2c here is Sadanandan 1963-64: Fig. 5. This author remarks, "The play on the board No. 5 is still in vogue and played with sheep and three tigers, the latter attempting to eat the former. In

this play the sheep over-power and keep the tigers at bay by their united action revealing that even the weakest can protect themselves when united: (Sadanandan 1963-64: 67).

10. The uneven distribution of cross-cut squares (N: 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12, 14, 15, 69, 70, 72, and 73; E: 7, 12, 13 and 73; W: 4, 5, 7, 11 and 73 in Murray's numbering system) is quite anomalous, and probably results from errors in cutting.

11. Sadanandan 1963-64: Fig. 4 illustrated a graffiti Vijayanagara board for Parchisi, in which no squares at all are marked, "located on the floor (just outside the Girbhagriha) of the Jain [*sic*] temple" (Sadanandan 1963-64: 67). This is probably the same board illustrated here.

12. This tradition is very unexpected, as the term consistently applies to the game of chess.

13. Figure 6 here is Sadanandan 1963-64: Fig. 10.

14. Sadanandan 1963-64: 68 remarks of this, his Figure 6: "The last is the master piece of women-folk plays and is played in almost all homes. This board is transferred on wood and forms part of the belongings of house-hold women and children who play with it." On this branch of the Mancala family, see Claus 1986.

## Works Cited

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- Murray, H.J.R., 1952, *A History of Board-Games Other than Chess*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Sadanandan, P., 1963-64, The Forgotten Game Boards of Vijayanagara Capital, *Journal of the Andhra Historical Research Society* 29: 65-68.
- Smith, A., 1999, Rock-Cut Features at Vijayanagara, *South Asian Studies*, 15: 41-46.
- de Voogt, Alexander J., 1997, *Mancala Board Games*, British Museum Press, London.

Table 1. Frequency of Game Boards by Zone

Zone	Map Sheets	Total Boards	Av/Sheet	Max/Sheet	Sd Dev
Urban Core	141	243	1.7	26	3.45
Royal Centre	61	242	4.0	31	6.83
Irrigated Valley	18	17	0.3	9	1.39
Sacred Centre	49	267	5.4	31	7.58
Total	269	769	2.9	31	5.43

*Note:* While we mapped 267 sheets, two sheets in the Sacred Centre each contained a substantial fragment of an adjacent map; here we include these two additional fragments. Av = Average, Max = Maximum, Sd Dev = Standard Deviation.

Table 2. Frequency of Types of Game Boards by Zone

Zone	Total	Alquerque	Blockade	Hunt	Race	Merels	Mankala	Grids	Unid.
Urban Core	243	37	10	14	67	38	21	11	45
Royal Centre	242	29	17	17	67	41	30	6	35
Irrigated Valley	17	0	2	3	2	5	1	0	4
Sacred Centre	267	36	34	35	53	42	28	8	31
Total	769	102	63	69	189	126	80	25	115

*Note:* Unid. = Unidentified game boards.

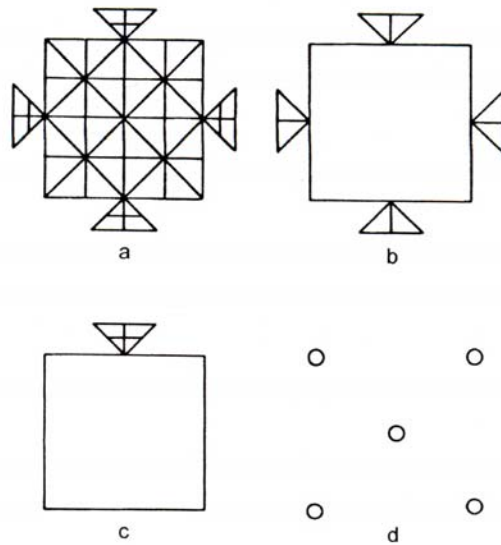


Figure 1. Alquerque and Blockade game boards:  
 a = Alquerque with cross-hatched grid and pendant triangles;  
 b = Alquerque variant with pendant triangles;  
 c = Alquerque variant with one pendant triangle;  
 d = Blockade with die-5 plan.

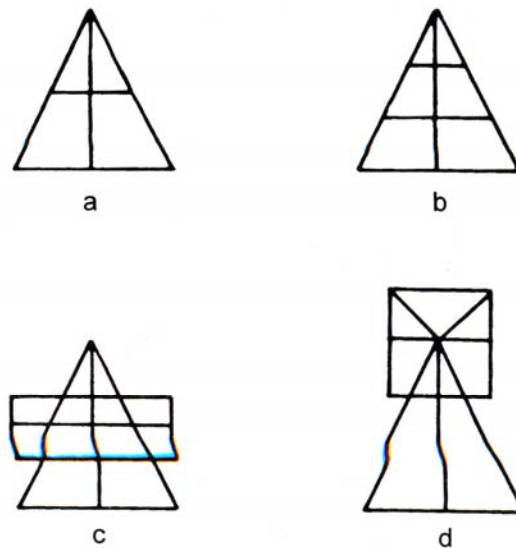


Figure 2. Leopard game boards:  
 a = variant with triangle divided by two cross-axes;  
 b = variant with triangle divided by three cross-axes;  
 c = Goats and Tigers variant with triangle divided by four  
 cross-axes, with horizontal axes extended to form rectangle;  
 d = variant with triangle divided by one cross-axis  
 with subdivided square overlying apex.

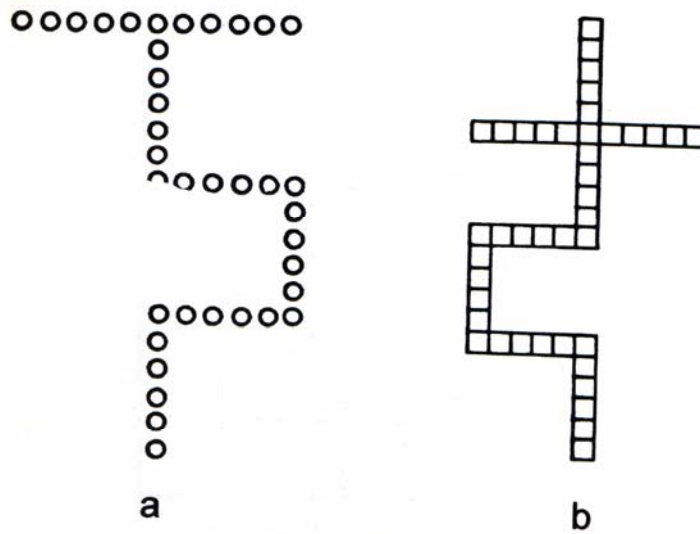


Figure 3. Race game boards:  
a = single track of pits pendant from horizontal line of pits;  
b = single track formed by pecked lines including cross-bar.

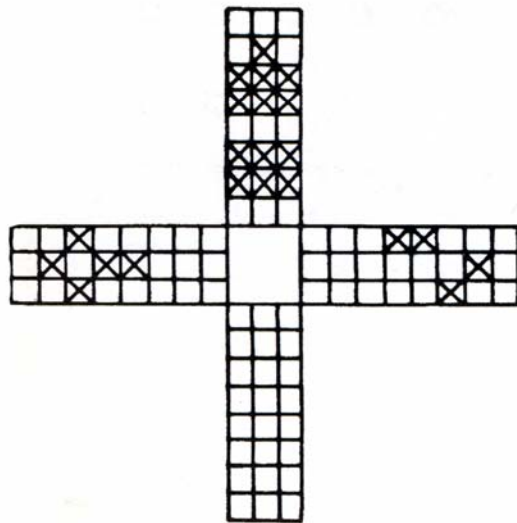


Figure 4. Parchisi game board variant with free cells cross-hatched.

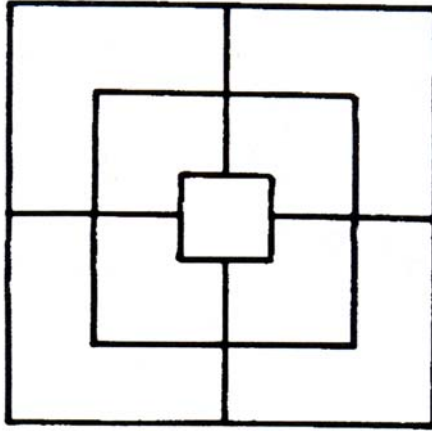


Figure 5. Merels game board variant,  
Nine Men's Morris.

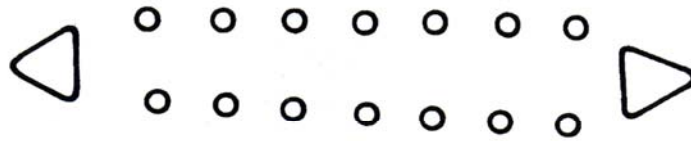


Figure 6. Mankala game board variant with pits for pieces at either end.





Plate 1. Alquerque game board on sheet-rock in Royal Centre with cross-hatched grid and pendant triangles.



Plate 2. Blockade game board on sheet-rock in Urban Core with pits in die-5 plan next to square lotus design.



Plate 3. Blockade game board on sheet-rock in Royal Centre with 8 pits surrounding central pit.

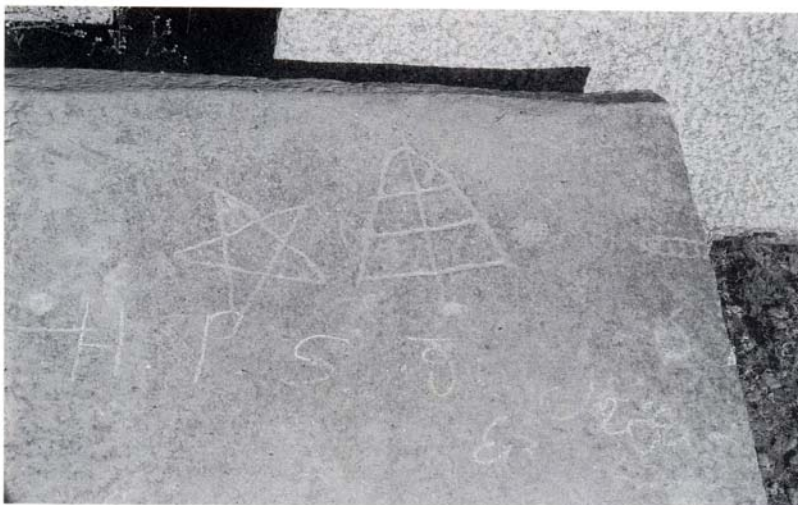


Plate 4. Leopard game board on top of basement in Vitthala temple with 5-pointed star (possible board), the last cells of a Race game (right) and modern graffiti.



Plate 5. Leopard game board on top of basement in the Royal Centre with vertical axis crossed by two rectangles extending beyond the triangle.



Plate 6. Race game board variant on sheet-rock in the Urban Core with the ends of the single tracks surrounded by eight pits.

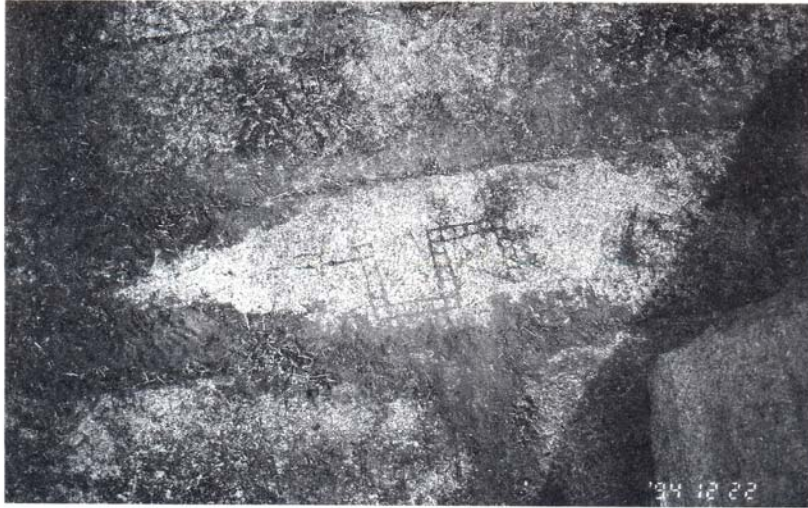


Plate 7. Ráçe game board on floor and adjacent to wall of a platform in Achyutaraya's temple with a single track formed by pecked lines.



Plate 8. Race game board variant on sheet-rock with the single track folded in on itself and a hoof-like double lobe at one end.

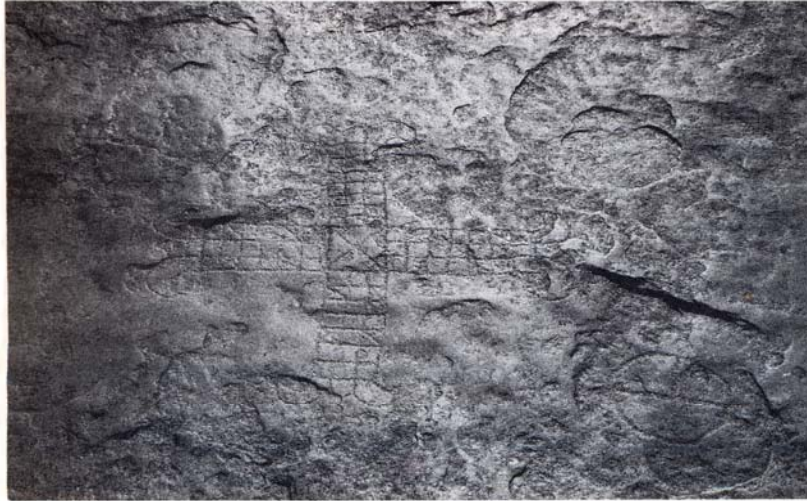


Plate 9. Parchisi game board on sheet-rock in the Royal Centre with crossed free cells; the last row of cells in each arm shaped like a petal. The purpose of the crossed circle at the lower right is unknown.



Plate 10. Merels game board on well-worn sheet-rock in the Urban Core associated with a die-5 Blockade game, a mortar, several square pits and four sets of hatched lines.



Plate 11. Mankala game board on sheet-rock in the Royal Centre with two rectangular pits between rows of circular pits to hold pieces.

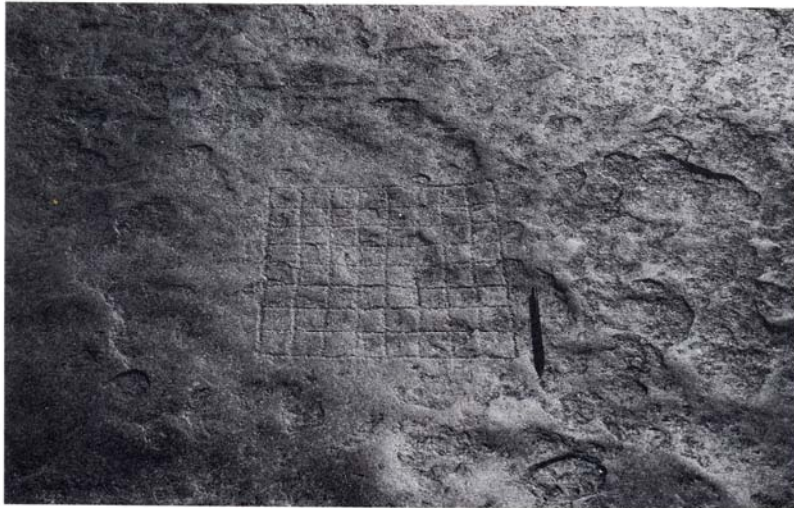


Plate 12. Game board on worn sheet-rock consisting of an 8 by 8 grid.