

PENTE GRAMMAI AND THE ‘HOLY LINE’

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Abstract

A great deal of the literary evidence surrounding the ancient Greek board game *pente grammai* has to do with its central and proverbial ‘holy line’. Although it seems that the goal of the game was to reach this holy line, the proverb always refers to ‘moving away from’ this holy line not toward it. But why would players move away from the line which is the goal? This paper argues that there was a strategic element to the game: just like in modern backgammon and in Zeno’s ‘table’ game from late antiquity, in *pente grammai* a player could knock an opponent’s ‘blots’ (*azuges*) off the board. This explains why a player might make the odd move of leaving the holy line: the aggressive and risky act might bring an advantage if the opponent has left a number of vulnerable pieces exposed. At the end, a possible reconstruction of the game is offered.

When Ajax and Achilles played their boardgame—famously depicted by Exekias and found on over 160 vases—the game they were playing was a backgammon-like game dubbed by modern scholars as ‘five lines’ (*pente grammai*)¹. This can be seen on one of the black-figure depictions where the viewer is allowed to observe the game-board of these two players at an angle: five parallel lines divide the length of the board and each player clearly has five game-pieces.² The archaeological record supports this vase depiction remarkably well, for example, with a miniature game-board of the seventh

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¹See Buchholz’s ‘Brettspielende Helden’ in *Laser* 1987, pp. 126–84, for a list of the 168 vase depictions. Lamer 1927, p. 1970 reports that the name *pente grammai* is modern, arising some time after Pauw 1726, p. 54 who referred to it as *ludus Palamedeus*. Pollux 9.97–8 says that the game is played on five lines but does not report the game’s name.

²Brussels *kyathos* (Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire), mid-5th century BCE. For image, see Schädler 2008, p. 177.

century BCE adorned with five parallel lines, ten games pieces, and a single die.³ It will be recalled that Ajax and Achilles announce the throws of this single die in their depicted game—on the Exekias vase, for example, Ajax has ‘three’ while Achilles has ‘four’.⁴ As Schädler has recently reconstructed the game, what is suggested by this evidence is a backgammon-like game, where the two players roll the die and race their pieces around the board until reaching a certain goal.⁵

Although Schädler offers an excellent overview of the material and a plausible reconstruction of the game, what is missing from his article is a thorough treatment of the most central piece of literary evidence: namely, the proverbial expression ‘to move from the holy line’.⁶ Most of what is known about this game, after all, comes from discussions of this proverb, and the earliest pieces of literary evidence are nothing but instances of the proverb found in Alcaeus (fl. early 6th BCE), Epicharmus (fl. early 5th BCE), and Sophron (fl. mid 5th BCE). Although Schädler in his reconstruction adopts the view of ancient scholarship that the ‘holy line’ was the end-point of the race, he does not fully overview and analyze the considerable ancient interest in this apparently odd move which consists of moving ‘away from’ the holy line and not to it. If the ‘holy line’ is the finish line, why would players move away from it?

In this article, I will argue that in *pente grammai* there was an aggressive element which still exists in backgammon today: namely the hitting of ‘blots’ (ἄζυγες, *azuges*), which is to say solitary pieces on the board.⁷ The game was thus not a simple race game where the two players rolled the die and waited to see who would win, but contained an appealing element of strategy and calculation: the pieces had to move around the board in pairs (or more) if a single piece was not to be left vulnerable to an opponent’s attack. It is

³Schädler 2008, p. 176 for image of this mid-7th century BCE model of a gaming table with cubic die from Anagyros (National Museum, Athens). Cf. the early-6th century BCE miniature gaming table with die but damaged surface from the Kerameikos at Athens (ibid., p. 175) and the 6th-century gaming table (National Museum, Copenhagen) with 9 parallel lines (ibid., p. 180 for image).

⁴Bucholz’s ‘Brettspielende Helden’ # 21 in Laser 1987, pp. 144–5 for bibliography.

⁵Schädler 2008.

⁶Cf. ibid., p. 173–4 for mention of the proverb in, e.g., Pollux, Alcaeus, and Theocritus; 196 for the idea that *Zugzwang* might cause a player to leave the holy line—an interesting possibility, but the proverb never suggests players being required to leave the holy line, but rather suggests players choosing to make this odd move in certain (usually desperate) situations.

⁷For *azuges* (ἄζυγες) as ‘blots’, cf. Agathias’ epigram on the Emperor Zeno’s game of ‘table’ (AP 9.482, line 26), with Austin 1934 and Hübner 2009. At the end of the article I will argue that this is Aristotle’s meaning of the term as well at *Pol.* 1.1253a10–11.

for this reason that one might make the strategic move of leaving ‘the holy line’: although a certain piece has reached the finish line and so generally would stay ‘unmoved’ (ἀκίνητος, *akinetos*) there, in certain cases it might be appealing to abandon the ‘holy line’, especially if an opponent has a number of vulnerable pieces left open on the game-board, or is in an imminent position to win the game.⁸

I will postpone reconstructing the game, however, until the end of the article. What is needed first is a careful analysis of the great deal of literary evidence. I wish to do this especially for those board-game scholars who, without a Greek background, would find this mass of material difficult to navigate. While Schädler only lightly touches upon this evidence, earlier more exhaustive treatments (Lamer, Austin, etc.) have the weakness of treating these thousand-plus years of Greek antiquity with equal weight, as if a Byzantine scholar dependent on late-antique dictionaries were more or less as informed about the game as a classical author who actually might have played it. This egalitarian approach has understandably led to a great deal of confusion since the sources often conflict with one another. The method I will be using, on the other hand, will be simple: since *pente grammai* seems to have been a game of the archaic and classical periods, the literary evidence of those periods takes priority, while the explanations of later scholars are treated with a good deal of suspicion, especially when they conflict with the actual archaic/classical evidence. Only at the end will I add evidence from ancient writers who speak of ‘board-games’ (πεττεία, *petteia*) more generally, something which the much-cited Lamer excludes from his discussion, but without good reason.⁹

What emerges from this study is thus not just a more strategic version of *pente grammai* which accommodates the literary evidence, but a history familiar to those who study the Greek past: *pente grammai* was played in the archaic and classical periods, but by the time of Pollux in the second century CE the game was felt to be an obscure piece of antiquity, suggesting that it had not actually been played for at least a century or two.

On the other hand, the proverb ‘to move from the holy line’ was still in use, found, for example, in those proverb handbooks that classicizing

⁸Cleararchus reports an ‘unmoved’ piece (fr. 11 Wehrli = Schol. Plat. *Laws* 5.739a), which frustrated Lamer 1927, p. 1972 (‘das Scholion ist unbrauchbar’). I will argue below that this information can be understood by the fact that pieces generally remain unmoved once they have reached the ‘holy line’. For the relationship between ‘holy’ (ἱερός, *hieros*) and ‘unmoved’ (ἀκίνητος, *akinetos*), see, e.g., schol. ad Theaet. 181b (‘...for holy things are immovable,’ ...τὰ γὰρ ἱερὰ ἀκίνητα).

⁹ibid., p. 1970.

authors so enjoyed in order to add knowing allusions to their writings. It is likely with reference to such handbooks, rather than first-hand experience with the game that writers like the first-century C.E. Plutarch and Philo used the phrase. Whatever games these later authors played in their spare time, the ‘holy line’ was no longer to be found on their game-boards.

The Literary Evidence During the Time when the Game was Played

The first reference to this game’s ‘holy line’ occurs in the early 6th century BCE lyric poet Alcaeus who writes: ‘now he takes the upper hand, having moved the [close-packed] stone from the holy line’ (or: ‘the-from-the-holy-line-stone’).¹⁰

It can be immediately seen that there is an actual reason why one might move from the ‘holy line,’ whatever it is: the player being described has made this move and by doing so ‘is now gaining the upper hand,’ suggesting that ‘moving from the holy line’ has the potential to change the outcome of the game in a positive way. The other two uses of the proverb from the earlier to mid-5th century do not offer much in the way of evidence, other than that the proverb was also known in Greek Sicily, a good distance from Alcaeus’ Lesbos: Epicharmus apparently used the proverb according to Byzantine lexicists¹¹ and another 5th-century Sicilian, Sophron, writes: ‘I will now indeed move it from the holy line (or: the from-the-holy-line-piece)’.¹²

One of the most difficult aspects of this proverb—and the one that caused a great deal of confusion among later scholars of antiquity, as I will discuss shortly—is that it does not immediately translate as ‘to move the piece from the holy line’ but rather, at first glance, ‘to move the-from-the-holy-line-piece’. For that reason, perhaps the “most” valuable evidence from the classical period arises in Plato’s *Laws* which departs from the grammar of the proverb and helpfully glosses the idea in more prosaic terms. Plato regularly

¹⁰νῦν δ’ οὗτος ἐπικρέτει | κινήσας τὸν ἀπ’ ἱράς †πύκινον λίθον, fr. 351 Lobel/Page.

¹¹Fr. 202 KA = Fr. 309 Rodríguez-Noriega Guillén = *Suda* α 4613. Cf. Photius α 3354 Theodoridis: “‘from the holy’: proverb “I will move the-from-the-holy”, but the proverb is cut off, since the ending is “I will move the-from-the-holy-piece.” The extended meaning is applied from board-games to people who have lost in a certain matter. Among board-game players is said to be a holy line. So Epicharmus says.’ (ἀφ’ ἱερᾶς· παροιμία “κινήσω τὸν ἀφ’ ἱερᾶς”. ἐλλείπει δὲ ἡ παροιμία· τὸ γὰρ ἐντελές· “κινήσω τὸν ἀφ’ ἱερᾶς πεττὸν.” τάττεται δὲ μετενηνεγμένον ἀπὸ τῶν πεττῶν ἐπὶ τῶν παραβαλλομένων τινὶ πράγματι. λέγεται δὲ τις παρὰ τοῖς πεσσεύουσιν ἱερὰ γραμμή. οὕτως Ἐπίχαρμος).

¹²κινήσω δ’ ἥδη καὶ τὸν ἀφ’ ἱερᾶς, 122 Hordern = Eust. *In Il.* 633.59.

makes references to board-games¹³—so much so that later imitators deploy board-game analogies to sound like Plato¹⁴—so it is understandable that one finds a reference to the ‘holy line’ in his corpus. In Book Five of the *Laws*, his Athenian has begun carving out his suggested legislation for the new Cretan colony Magnesia: where the colony should be located, how many citizens it should have, how they should be chosen, how the city should be divided into districts, and so forth. His next step regarding the actual laws for the regime, he forecasts, is going to be seen as an ‘odd move’ because rather than simply giving the best laws to this city he is going to offer three types of regime (the best, second best, and third best) and allow the founder of the colony to choose. It is an odd move simply because one would assume that the legislator who knows the best laws would simply establish those as the actual laws rather than offering the founders a choice in the matter: the Athenian, however, chooses a different move.

It is regarding this ‘odd move’ that the Athenian turns to his *pente grammai* image: ‘the move after this one for the preparation of the laws, just as for game-pieces from the holy line, is unusual, and might perhaps make the listener astonished at first.’¹⁵ Two extremely important pieces of evidence should be noticed here. First, the move is felt to be ‘unusual’ (*aēthēs*) and is not the typical move one would expect the player to make. Second, the move ‘from the holy line’ is not restricted to a particular piece—as might be suspected from the proverb’s grammatical construction—but a move that can be made with game-pieces (*pettoi*) in general. It would not be possible to discern this otherwise from the phrase ‘to move the-from-the-holy-line-piece’ which many later scholars of antiquity understandably interpret as a special piece rather than a particular move open to all pieces. Yet with this evidence the proverb can be grammatically understood as a proleptic construction, as Lamer had already seen, although he offered no parallels.¹⁶ ‘To move the-from-the-holy-line-piece’ is simply proleptic for ‘to move the piece from the holy line’ and Plato’s evidence is central to this

¹³Cf. Plato *Charm.* 174b, *Gorg.* 450d, *Rep.* 333b, 374c, 487b–c, *Laws* 820c–d, 903d.

¹⁴Cf. Jowett’s ‘Introduction’ to the *Eryxias*: ‘like the exercise of a student, [the Eryxias] is full of small imitations of Plato: ...the figure of the game at draughts, borrowed from the *Republic*, etc.’

¹⁵5.739a1: ἡ δὲ τὸ μετὰ τοῦτο φορά, καθάπερ πεττῶν ἀφ’ ἱεροῦ, τῆς τῶν νόμων κατασκευῆς, ἀήθης οὖσα, τάχ’ ἂν θαυμάσαι τὸν ἀκούοντα τὸ πρῶτον ποιήσειεν.

¹⁶Lamer 1927, p. 1971: ‘In diesem Sprichworte ist ἀφ’ proleptisch gebraucht: κινεῖν τὸν ἐπὶ τῆς ἱεράς γραμμῆς λίθον ἀπ’ αὐτῆς.’ This construction of an attributive prepositional phrase with a verb of motion is explained by Smyth (‘constructio praegnans’, 1660) as ‘anticipation of the verbal action (attraction of the preposition with the article)’. For further examples cf. Demosthenes *Androt.* 52.7, *Timoc.* 164.4, Plut. *Timol.* 16.9.

interpretation.

By the end of the Classical period, there is already a substantial collection of clues regarding what the move ‘from the holy line’ could mean. For Alcaeus a player moved ‘from the holy line’ and by doing so was ‘gaining the upper hand’; for Plato a player’s move ‘from the holy line’ was thought to be ‘unusual’, yet, as the Athenian explains regarding his legislation, he has already calculated why this ‘unusual’ move is in fact the correct one. Less than a century after Plato’s *Laws*, another important piece of information is found in the Hellenistic Theocritus, who implies a distinct note of aggression in the act of moving ‘from the holy line’. In *Idyll* 6, he writes of Galatea’s flirtations with Polyphemus and how she ‘flees when she is loved and pursues when she is not loved and moves the rock from the line’.¹⁷

Already implicit in Alcaeus, where the move ‘from the holy line’ causes the player to gain ‘the upper hand’, here the move is explicitly connected to an aggressive ‘pursuit’: Galatea, as it were, is ‘going on the offensive’ and, to illustrate this ‘pursuit’ she is described as ‘moving from the [holy] line’. The picture Theocritus depicts here is of a love-game where sometimes the player is chasing and at other times being chased, much like pieces circling the game-board, pursuing and being pursued by one another. ‘Moving-from-the-holy-line’ is here associated with the player who aggressively ‘pursues’. This would certainly help to explain not only why Alcaeus’ player would move from the holy line, but also why he would gain the upper hand by doing so: there appears to be an aggressive element in the game.

Ancient Scholars Making Sense of the Proverb and Game

Little would be known about this game if it were not for the help of ancient scholars. It would not even be known, for example, that the ‘holy line’ was to be found on a game-board of five lines. But these scholars also remind that, at some point, the game must have stopped being played and fallen into obscurity, otherwise the scholarship would not have been required at all. One such scholar is Julius Pollux, who was awarded the imperial chair of rhetoric at Athens in the 180’s CE, and wrote a sweeping work on classical

¹⁷6.19: καὶ φεύγει φιλέοντα καὶ οὐ φιλέοντα διώκει, | καὶ τὸν ἀπὸ γραμμᾶς κινεῖ λίθον. See Gow ad loc. for the interpretation of this line with parallels. Both participles refer to Polyphemus.

Greek culture and usage called the *Onomasticon*.¹⁸ The work only survives in epitomized form, so what remains about this board-game may be more terse than his original entry. In Book 7 he includes the ‘holy line’ game among a list of games that were sometimes involved in gambling (*kubeia*),¹⁹ and then in Book 9 adds a bit more information:

Since *pettoi* are pebbles, and each of the players had five (*pettoi*) on five lines, it has been reasonably said by Sophocles (fr. 429 Radt): ‘Both five-line game-pieces and throws of the dice.’ And of the five lines from either side was a certain middle one called the ‘holy line’: and the person moving the game-piece from there [according to] proverb ‘moves the piece from the holy line’.²⁰

One gets a sense of where things stood with this game in the late second century CE: the game has clearly stopped being played long ago and can only be reconstructed from quotes of earlier literature, which are potentially misleading due to their poetic diction. Sophocles’ transferred epithet (it is the board which has five lines not the pieces), for example, led to a confusion which still can be found in standard Greek dictionaries today.²¹ On the other hand, somewhere along the way arose evidence for ancient scholarship, now lost to us, that the ‘holy line’ was to be found in the middle of the board. This evidence tends to be accepted since it makes sense and is congruent with the archaeological evidence: these boards simply have five lines (there are no cross-cutting or special lines), so the middle of the five is not just as good as any other, but satisfyingly prominent.

Pollux’s information is also congruent with Plato’s: there is a special *line* which is “holy” not a special *piece*. But it is worth noting that a large num-

¹⁸For the *Onomasticon* and its abridgement see Bethe 1919, p. 776, Pollux and Bethe 1900, v–xix, and Tosi 2007.

¹⁹For this meaning of the word, see Kidd 2017 ‘How to Gamble in Greek: The Meaning of *Kubeia*’ (*Journal of Hellenic Studies* 137).

²⁰9.97–8: ἐπεὶ δὲ ψῆφοι μὲν εἰσιν οἱ πεττοί, πέντε δ’ ἑκάτερος τῶν παιζόντων εἶχεν ἐπὶ πέντε γραμμῶν, εἰκότως εἴρηται Σοφοκλεῖ “καὶ πεσσὰ πεντέγραμμοι καὶ κύβων βολαί.” τῶν δὲ πέντε τῶν ἐκατέρωθεν γραμμῶν μέση τις ἦν ἱερὰ καλουμένη γραμμὴ· καὶ ὁ τὸν ἐκεῖθεν κινῶν πεττὸν παρομιάν “κινεῖ (Bethe: κίνει) τὸν ἀφ’ ἱερᾶς.”

²¹See LSJ πεσσός s.v. I.2: ‘the board on which the game was played, πεσσὰ πεντέγραμμοι, since the pieces were played on five lines.’ Actually, this is just an example of hypallage (transferred epithet), which is very typical of Sophocles: cf. *Ant.* 793–4 (‘a same-blooded quarrel of men’, νεῖκος ἀνδρῶν | ξύναμιον), *Electra* 1231 (‘joyful tear’, γεγηθὸς...δάκρυον), OC 1282 (‘upset utterances’, ῥήματα...δυσχεράναντα). Cf. Jebb ad Locrian Ajax fr. 11 (παρδαληφόρον δέρος) where he cites further examples (κερασφόρους στόρθυγγας fr. 89, ξιφηφόρους ἀγῶνας Aesch. *Cho.* 582, κισσοφόροις ἐν θαλίαις, Eur. *Bacch.* 384.)

ber of ancient scholars understandably miss this point, almost certainly because they are misled by the grammatical construction discussed above (‘to move the-from-the-holy-line-stone’). It is difficult to know precisely when this misinformation entered the scholarship, but it is found in a proverb handbook falsely attributed to Plutarch,²² two scholia to Theocritus,²³ two scholia to Plato’s *Laws*,²⁴ the tenth-century *Suda*,²⁵ and can still be occasionally found in scholarship today.²⁶ Although most ancient scholars and lexicographers continue to maintain the view that at issue is a special line not a special stone, it is worth suggesting that this error might have entered the scholarship rather early.²⁷ Modern scholars have noticed that in later writers like Philo and Plutarch the phrase often seems to mean something like ‘play one’s trump card’, as if it were a special piece being played.²⁸ More tellingly, Philo especially appears to be suggesting that it is possible to ‘begin’ with that special piece.²⁹ Rather than assuming that the game had so radically changed by the time of Philo and Plutarch, it is more likely that they too were using proverb handbooks to make their writing more classicizing. The same misinformation found in ancient proverb handbooks yielded the catachreseis of these later writers who, after all, depended on such proverb handbooks. This is not at all an unusual occurrence for the period: there were great debates during the early centuries of the common

²²Plut. *Proverbs which the Alexandrians Used* 1.67 (CPG 1.67): κινήσω τὸν ἀφ’ ἱερᾶς· ἐπὶ τῶν τὴν ἐσχάτην βοήθειαν κινούντων τέτακται. * * δὲ ἀπὸ τῶν πεττευόντων· περὶ τούτοις κυκείον †τις ψῆφος οἷον ἱερὴ καὶ ἀκίνητος τεῶν νομιζομένη.

²³Cf. schol. ad Theoc. 6.18/19g and 6.18/19i Wendel (=TLG). The latter reads: ‘The phrase is applied metaphorically from the game commonly called *zatrikion*. For after players have made many moves and one player cannot beat the other, he moves the from-the-line-rock, which is to say the piece called ‘king.’ (ἡ δὲ λέξις μεταφορικῶς ἀπὸ τῶν παίζοντων τὸ κοινολέκτως λεγόμενον ζατρίκιον. ἐκεῖνοι γὰρ ὅταν πολλὰ ποιήσαντες οὐ δύναται ὁ ἕτερος νικήσαι τὸν ὁμοπαίκτηρα, κινεῖ καὶ τὸν ἀπὸ γραμμῆς λίθον, ἡγουν τὸν οὕτω βασιλέα καλούμενον.) For the Byzantine *zatrikion* (loaned from Persian *chatrang*), see Murray (1913) 162-8; due to this word, the scholion cannot be dated before the 9th century CE.

²⁴Schol. ad *Lg.* 739a: ‘among these is a certain piece which is holy and unmoveable’ (παρὰ τούτοις γὰρ κεῖται τις ψῆφος οἷον ἱερὰ καὶ ἀκίνητος); schol. ad *Lg.* 820c: ‘and they moved the piece on it [the line] last, calling it holy’ (καὶ τὴν ἐπ’ αὐτῆς ψῆφον ἐσχάτην ἐκίνουν, καὶ αὐτὴν ἱεράν καλοῦντες).

²⁵*Suda* K 1642: ‘for among these is a holy piece’ (παρ’ αὐτοῖς γὰρ κεῖται ψῆφος ἱερὰ).

²⁶See, e.g., Colson 1942, Kurke 1999, pp. 261–4.

²⁷The line is holy, not some special piece, e.g., at Pollux 9.97–8, Photius A 3354, T373; *Suda* A4613, T758; Eustath.*In Od.* 1397, 40–48 (quoted below).

²⁸Cf. Plut. *Mor.* 783b (*An Seni*), 975a (*Soll. Anim.*), *Adversus Colotem* 1116e; Philo, *Leg. ad Gaius* 22.4, 108.6, *On Dreams* 2.119. For the trump card interpretation cf., e.g., Lamer 1927, p. 1971; Colson 1942 for further discussion of the Philo passages.

²⁹For the Philo passages, see previous note.

era regarding the meaning of classical Attic words and phrases, and, as I have argued elsewhere, terms were often misunderstood.³⁰

Thus, according to ancient scholars like Pollux, the game is played on five lines and the middle line is ‘holy’. As Schädler rightly notes this is congruent with the archaeological finds of five-lined boards from the archaic and classical period as well as the depiction of Achilles and Ajax playing on a five-lined board with five pieces each. But a central piece of information, regarding how the game is played—namely that reaching the ‘holy line’ is the goal of the game—is not found until a much later scholar, Eustathius in the twelfth century. I have urged caution elsewhere about equating Eustathius’ entries too quickly with the lost work on games from the second century CE Suetonius,³¹ yet since Eustathius’ information is all that remains on the point of the game’s goal, it is important to discuss here. One can immediately appreciate the richness of this passage in its quotation of fragments which would otherwise have been lost. Here is what Eustathius writes in his report about ‘the one who wrote about games’:³²

He [i.e., the “one who writes about Greek games”] says that the *pestoi* were five pebbles. From either side [i.e., of the board] they played with these on five lines, where each of the players has his own [i.e., five pieces]. Sophocles: ‘both five-lined game-pieces and throws of the dice’. He says that through these was stretched also a middle line. They called this line ‘holy’ as is made clear above [1396.61], since the loser moves to it last. That’s also where the proverb ‘to move the from-the-holy-line’, clearly ‘-stone’ is meant, for those who are desperate and in need of extreme help. Sophron: ‘Now I will move the-from-the-holy-line’. Alcaeus says it fully [i.e., gives the complete proverb] ‘and now he gains the upper hand after moving the *peiras pukinon* stone.’ And such also is in Theocritus, I will move the-from-the-line-stone. And he [i.e., the one who writes about games] says that Diodorus the Megarian introduced such a stone for likeness to the dances of the stars, while Clearchus makes them as an analogy to the five planets.³³

³⁰Kidd 2012.

³¹See Kidd 2017 ‘Greek Dicing, *Astragaloi*, and the Euripides Throw’ (*Journal of Hellenic Studies* 137).

³²For ‘the one who wrote about Greek games’ cf. Eust. *Od.* 1397.7 and 1397.39 with Taillardat 1967, pp. 27–31 for the history of identifying this person with Suetonius.

³³Eust. *In Od.* 1397, 40–48: τοὺς δὲ πεσσούς λέγει, ψήφους εἶναι πέντε. αἷς ἐπὶ πέντε

Many of these fragments only appear here, so it is an invaluable piece of Eustathius. At the same time it is worth observing, for example, that these precious fragments do not automatically cause Eustathius himself to become some infallible scholar. For example, Eustathius is using here a manuscript that reports Alcaeus as writing not ‘*ap ieras*’ (‘from the holy’) but ‘*ap peiras*’ (‘from the wallet’): an easy error. But rather than catching this error, he decides elsewhere that Alcaeus must actually be making a joke on the proverbial phrase.³⁴ So, it is worth remembering that Eustathius, despite these valuable fragments, is not some transparent window onto these archaic and classical texts.

The key bit of information in this passage is that ‘the loser is the one who reaches the holy line last.’ There is no way to prove that this in fact is correct and is indeed the goal of the game; yet at the very least, it does not clash with what is known from the archaeological finds and what is written by Pollux, and even appears to make good sense. There is clearly a board of five lines and two players racing around the board throwing their single die: but what is the goal? If Eustathius is right, the goal is that ‘holy line’ in the center: once a player lands on that ‘holy line’ with a piece, that piece is presumably ‘safe’ or ‘home’ while the rest of the pieces continue to circle the board in order to land on it. When considered in this way, one can make sense too of the idea that the piece or pieces on the holy line were considered to be ‘unmoved’ perhaps even ‘unmoveable’—something which caused Lamer a good deal of frustration.³⁵ The solution is simple: once a player reaches the goal, that is, the holy line, there would be no obvious reason to move it, and therefore that piece would generally wait there until the end of the game, gradually being joined by more and more ‘unmoved’ pieces.

Without the report from Eustathius and the much earlier report from Pollux there would be little to be said about the game with the ‘holy line’.

γραμμαῶν ἔπαιζον ἐκατέρωθεν, ἵνα ἕκαστος τῶν πεττευόντων ἔχη τὰς καθ’ ἑαυτόν. Σοφοκλῆς. καὶ πεσσὰ πεντάγραμμα καὶ κύβων βολαί. παρετίνατο δὲ φησι δι’ αὐτῶν, καὶ μέση γραμμὴ. ἦν ἱερὰν ὠνόμαζον ὡς ἀνωτέρω δηλοῦται, ἐπεὶ ὁ νικῶμενος, ἐπ’ ἐσχάτην αὐτὴν ἵεται. ὅθεν καὶ παροιμία, κινεῖν τὸν ἀφ’ ἱερᾶς, λίθον δηδαδῆ, ἐπὶ τῶν ἀπεγνωσμένων καὶ ἐσχάτης βοηθείας δεομένων. Σώφρων. κινήσω δ’ ἤδη καὶ τὸν ἀφ’ ἱερᾶς. Ἀλκαῖος δὲ φησιν ἐκ πλήρους, νῦν δ’ οὗτος ἐπικρέκει (sic: I translate above as ἐπικρέτει) κινήσας τὸν πείρας πυκινὸν λίθον. τοιοῦτον δὲ καὶ παρὰ Θεοκρίτῳ τὸ, τὸν ἀπὸ γραμμᾶς κινήσω λίθον. Διοδώρου δὲ φησι τοῦ Μεγαρικοῦ ἐνάγοντος τὸν τοιοῦτον λίθον εἰς ὁμοιότητα τῆς τῶν ἄστρον χορείας, Κλέαρχος τοῖς πέντε φησὶ πλάνησιν ἀναλογεῖν.

³⁴Eustath. *In Il.* 2.278.2–3 Van der Valk (633.63–4): κωμικευσάμενος ἐκεῖνος καὶ ἀντὶ τοῦ ἱερᾶς ὡς ἐν παρωδίᾳ γράψας τὸ πῆρας. For Eustathius, see Wilson 1996, pp. 196–204: he is described as ‘not an acute textual critic’ at 199.

³⁵Lamer 1927, p. 1972.

One would have five-lined boards from the archaeological record, but no clue that the middle line of this board was called ‘holy’ or that the goal of this game was to reach that central ‘holy line’. That major reward of following ancient scholarship of course does not make the information itself correct, and so it is worth simply to remember that the game’s reconstruction is based on that “if”: if these scholars who are writing centuries after the fact are correct with their information, there is a five-line board game where players try to reach the central holy line first. Although Eustathius’ and Pollux’ reports cannot be proven, they do appear plausible and, far from conflicting with the archaeological evidence, they fit it rather well.

The Aggressive Element of the Game

Thus far we have simply reached Schädler’s reconstruction via a more thorough journey through the literary rather than archaeological evidence. It should be noted, however, that the quotation from the third-century BCE Diodorus Cronus supports his reconstruction beautifully: pieces moving around the board in a continuous ongoing revolution do look like the stars circling the night-sky (or, as Diodorus puts it, the ‘dance of the stars’).³⁶ And if one wished to push his analogy further, one might read his comparison as evidence that all the pieces were moving in the same direction counterclockwise around the board, and not in opposing directions as in modern backgammon.³⁷ The third-century BCE Clearchus of Soli meanwhile seems to have one-upped Plato in his board-game analogies with an extended analogy of *pente grammai* in his *Arcesilaus*. If both ‘boardgame’ (*petteia*) fragments are from the same passage as Wehrli suggests, Clearchus must be illustrating a certain astronomical conception of the night-sky with reference to this boardgame, perhaps in the middle of game-play.³⁸ There are ‘five planets’ circling the sky (or board) while at least one piece (or star) sits in its final position ‘unmoved’ at the center. That planets move in stops and starts is in some ways an improvement on Diodorus’ analogy

³⁶Eustath. *In Od.* 1397, 46–7: Διοδώρου δὲ φησι τοῦ Μεγαρίκου ἐνάγοντος τὸν τοιοῦτον λίθον εἰς ὁμοιότητα τῆς τῶν ἀστρῶν χορείας. For the identification of Diodorus, cf. Taillardat 1967, p. 154.

³⁷For similar boardgames, cf. Parlett 1999, pp. 58–87.

³⁸Soles and Wehrli 1948, p. 49. One must be cautious about how much of fragment 11 is from Clearchus and how much is from the scholar citing him. I only take Clearchus to be saying that a piece can be ‘holy and unmoveable, considered among the gods’ (i.e. the one which has reached the holy line), not that there is a special piece that is such: this seems to be the addition of a later scholar.

of continuous stellar motion: the courses of game-pieces ‘wander’ like the planets.

The question at issue, however, regards this ‘holy line’: if this is the goal to which the two players are racing, why would one proverbially move *from* the holy line? Since this proverb supplies both the earliest and most frequent literary evidence about the game, it would be preferable to include it rather than ignore it. As was seen in Alcaeus, a player is able to ‘gain the upper hand’ by moving from the holy line, something which would not make sense if it were simply a race game. In Theocritus one finds a further clue to Alcaeus, as was seen: moving from the holy line is an act of aggression. By moving from the holy line, the player, like Galatea, ‘goes on the offensive’.

If *pente grammai* had an aggressive element, it should be remembered that a number of so-called race-games share in this: in modern backgammon one races around the board but is able to knock vulnerable pieces off the board along the way, pieces referred to as ‘blots’. Nor is this a modern phenomenon: the emperor Zeno in the 5th century CE is described in Agathias’ epigram as suffering an unlucky dice roll that left a number of ‘blots’ (ἄζυγες, *azuges*, literally ‘unyoked’ pieces) exposed on the board.³⁹ Zeno’s game of ‘table’ is almost identical to the *tavli* game still played in Greece today—better known by English-speakers as backgammon—and no scholar would deny that *tavli*/backgammon is a direct descendant of the game Agathias describes.

The 5th century CE, however is still a great distance from the 5th/4th century BCE. Nevertheless, an important clue about *pente grammai*’s aggressive element may be found in the fourth-century BCE Aristotle. In the *Politics*, he famously writes that the person without a city (*apolis*) is naturally ‘desirous of war, since he is unyoked (*azux*), as in boardgames’.⁴⁰ Considering the political context, this passage has been traditionally interpreted as referring to *polis*, a capture game played without dice.⁴¹ Yet, as Hübner has convincingly demonstrated in a recent article, Aristotle’s description of the ‘unyoked’ piece (*azux*) as ‘desirous of war’ is completely incompatible with what is known about this game.⁴² As Pollux and other ancient scholars

³⁹See above n. 7.

⁴⁰*Pol.* 1.1253a10–11: πολέμου ἐπιθυμητής, ἅτε περ ἄζυξ ὦν ὥσπερ ἐν πεττοῖς.

⁴¹Cf. Austin 1940, p. 265, Murray 1952, p. 27, Kurke 1999, pp. 268–70. Discussions of *polis* also in Lamer 1927, pp. 1973–5, M. Hansen 2002. Newman ad loc. offers Agathias’ epigram (AP 9.482) as a parallel, but there is general confusion with the Roman duodecim scripta and a treatment of the ‘five lines’ games as a game of ‘draughts’. For ‘war’-style board-games in general, see Murray 1952, pp. 53–97.

⁴²Hübner 2009, p. 88.

explain *polis*, ‘the skill of the game’ lies in capturing an opponent’s piece by surrounding it with two of one’s own pieces.⁴³ That is, one requires *two* pieces to do any aggressive capturing at all, and it is simply impossible to be aggressive with a single piece. Considering this state of affairs, how can a single piece be ‘desirous of war’ in a game of *polis*? There is nothing it can do other than try to escape an opponent’s capture.

Aristotle thus cannot be referring to *polis* in this boardgame reference. The other two boardgames that are known from Greek antiquity—*diagrammismos*⁴⁴ and *naumachia*⁴⁵—are more obscure than *pente grammai* and *polis*, but at least according to Pollux and other ancient scholars they resemble *polis*, with a similar method of capture described for *diagrammismos* found in Eustathius. Aristotle’s boardgame reference of an ‘*azux*’ piece thus raises a number of troublesome questions for the exegete: is he referring to an unknown boardgame? Is one of the boardgames that is known improperly known? Is Aristotle confused?, and so forth. One can either explore such endless possibilities or use Occam’s razor and turn to *pente grammai*. From Theocritus and Alcaeus it was learned that one can ‘pursue’ in this game and ‘gain the upper hand’, suggesting that a piece indeed might be seen as ‘desirous’ for attacking, to use Aristotle’s term. Further, the only other use of the word ‘unyoked’ (*azux*) in a boardgame-context arises in a similar backgammon-like game where players race around the board, knocking ‘unyoked’ pieces (ἄζυγες, *azuges*, i.e., ‘blots’) off the board along the way. Zeno’s table game bears a certain resemblance to *pente grammai*, and, along those lines, it should be recalled that attempts at doubling the *pente grammai* game-board are already well attested by the third century BCE, as Schädler has shown.⁴⁶

If Aristotle is referring to *pente grammai*—surely the best candidate of the known boardgames of Greek antiquity—the game’s strategy becomes clearer: rather than two players rolling the dice and waiting to see who would land all his pieces on the holy line first, players needed to move their pieces

⁴³Pollux 9.98–99: ἡ τέχνη τῆς παιδιᾶς ἐστὶ περιλήψει δύο ψήφων ὁμοχρόων τὴν ἐτερόχρων ἀνελεῖν... Cf. the game described by Ovid AA 3.358 (unus cum gemino calculus hoste perit).

⁴⁴For *diagrammismos*, cf. Poll. 9.99 where he says it was similar to the boardgame modern and Byzantine scholars call ‘polis’; cf. Eustath. 2.278.4–7 Van der Valk (633) describes it as a board-game played with sixty white and black pieces.

⁴⁵For *naumachia*, cf. Pollux 7.206, Lucilius fr. 457 Marx, Moeris’ lexicon π51 Hansen; Lamer 1927, p. 1988; Effenterre 1995 for an inscription and possible *naumachia* game board.

⁴⁶For doubling the board, cf. Schädler 2008, p. 181. For the clear differences between the Roman XII scripta and such boards, cf. *ibid.*, p. 179.

strategically in a minimum of pairs around the board, since unpaired pieces (ἄζυγες, *azuges*) were vulnerable to attack. This defensive style of game-play is to be contrasted with the single piece (ἄζυξ, *azux*) which can only attack other vulnerable pieces since it is incapable of defending itself. Seen in this way, it becomes much clearer why one might choose to move a piece ‘from the holy line’. If the opponent has vulnerable pieces on the board, one could move a piece from the holy line in order to knock those vulnerable pieces off the board and make the opponent start over with them. It is a risky move to make, of course, and an aggressive one: the paroemiographers report that it is ‘a move made when one is in dire straits’. Yet it becomes possible to see how Alcaeus’ player was able to gain the upper hand by making this move; why Theocritus associates it with ‘going on the offensive’; and also why the single piece (*azux*) would be associated with moving aggressively—‘desirous’ of attack as Aristotle says—rather than working defensively in tandem around the board. As Plato reports, the move is ‘unusual’, but sometimes in a boardgame there is no other way to stave off imminent defeat.

By way of conclusion, I offer an alternative reconstruction of the game’s rules, footnoting where the information comes from and italicizing the rules which are more inference than fact:

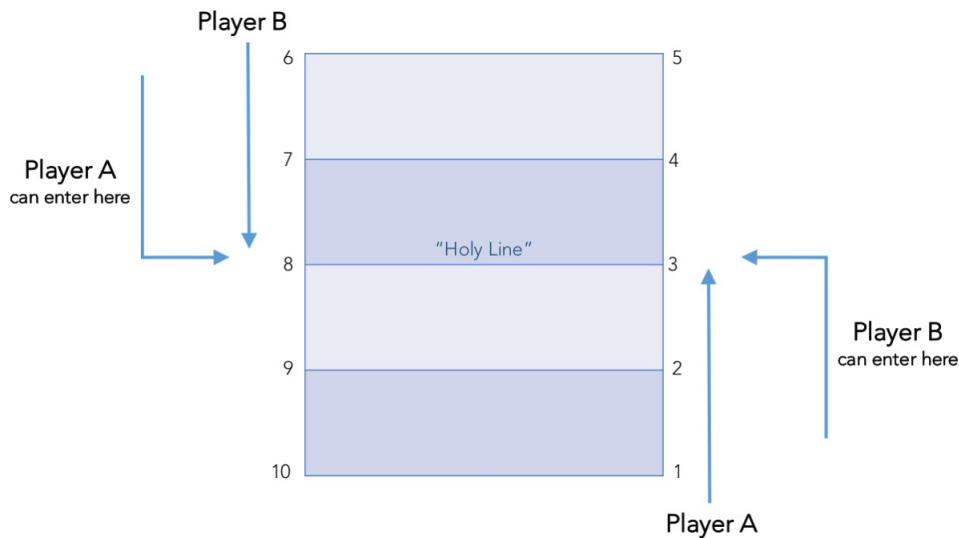
How to play (a possible reconstruction)

1. Each player has five pieces and moves their pieces counter-clockwise around the board according to the roll of a single die. Each player *starts at the bottom corner on the right-hand side* (a full revolution back to that right-hand corner requires 11 steps).
2. The goal is to land all pieces on the ‘holy line’ in the center, *which can only be entered at each player’s left-hand side*.⁴⁷
3. *Roll to see who goes first, pieces are kept off the playing space of the board*.⁴⁸

⁴⁷For five pieces each, see above notes on archaeological finds and Pollux; for counter-clockwise, this is suggested by the raised right hands in the depictions (cf. Schädler 2008, p. 188) and supported by Diodorus’ ‘dance of the stars.’ Between the two possible points to enter the holy line (point 3 or point 8) the further point is more obvious for the pacing of the game (e.g., one does not want to reach the goal on the first roll).

⁴⁸On the Exekias vase, Ajax and Achilles may be rolling to see who goes first. The opening position of the pieces off the board may be supported by the depictions of the pieces arranged along the sides of the board. I interpret the depictions of pieces lined around the board not as the starting positions of the pieces (ibid., p. 188 for this view),

4. If a player has two or more pieces ‘yoked’ on a line the other player cannot land on that side of the line.⁴⁹
5. If a player lands on the opponent’s single piece (i.e. *azux* or ‘blot’), the opponent *has to remove that piece from the board and start over with it*.⁵⁰



but as where the pieces are kept when they are off the actual playing space of the board (i.e., this is where a piece sits before it enters the game, and where it returns when knocked off).

⁴⁹For the *azux* or blot, see above n. 7. This defensive strategy would seem to be the traditional purpose of ‘yoking’ pieces in backgammon-like games. I know of no depiction where two or more pieces are shown ‘yoked’ on a line, but how could the game be played if only one piece were allowed at each point? If all the pieces are on the board there would be no place left to move to, and if many pieces are on the board there would be too much traffic to move regularly. So the question becomes: what happens when there are two pieces on the same point?

⁵⁰For the *azux* or blot, see above n. 7. There clearly must be some penalty and starting over with the piece off the board just reflects rule #2.

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