

# ANCIENT AMERICAN BOARD GAMES, I: FROM TEOTIHUACAN TO THE GREAT PLAINS

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## Abstract

Besides the ubiquitous patolli—a race game played on a cruciform gameboard—the Aztecs had obviously a few other board games. Unfortunately their names have not been recorded. We owe to Diego Durán, writing in the last quarter of the 16th century from local sources, some hints of what appears to be a “war game” and a second, different race game that he calls ‘fortuna’. A close examination of some Precolumbian codices shows a rectangular design with a chequered border, together with beans and gamepieces, which has correctly been interpreted as a board game. Many similar diagrams can be seen carved on stone in temples and public places, from Teotihuacan (c. 4th-7th century AD) to late Toltec times (9th-12th century AD). Of this game too we do not know the name. It has tentatively been called *quauhpatolli* (“eagle- or wooden-patolli”) by Christian Duverger (1978)—although this seems to have been the classic post-conquest Nahuatl name for the game of chess—or “proto-patolli”, and more concretely “rectángulo de cintas” (rectangle of bands) by William Swezey and Bente Bittman (1983).

The lack of any representation of this game in all Postcolumbian codices, as painted by Aztec artists commissioned by Spanish scholars interested in the Aztec culture, is clear indication that the game had disappeared before the Spanish conquest, at least in central Mexico. No Aztec site shows any such gameboard. Fortunately this game had survived until the 20th (and 21st!) century but located in the Tarascan country, now the state of Michoacán. It was discovered, unchanged, in a Tarascan (Purepecha) village by Ralph L. Beals and Pedro Carrasco, who published their find in 1944. At that time Beals and Carrasco had no idea the game was attested in early codices and Teotihuacan to Maya and Toltec archaeological sites. In Purepecha the game is called *k'uillichi*.

There is evidence of an evolution that led to a simplification of the game: less tracks, less gamesmen (in fact only one per player, while *k'uillichi* has four), and less ‘dice’. From a “complex” race game, the new debased version turned to be a simple single-track race game with no strategy at all. It is possible that this process took place in Michoacán. (A few examples of the simplified game were found in some

Tarascan villages.) Also it seems the widespread use of the Nahua language, which the Spanish promoted, led to calling the game, and/or its dice, *patol*. As it was, *patol* proved to be very appealing and became very popular in the Mexican West, finally reaching the Noroeste, that is, the present North-West of Mexico and Southwest of the United States.

This seems to have been a recent trend, since its progress was observed with much detail by missionaries living in close contact with the Indians along what was called the ‘Camino Real’, the long highway that led from western Mexico to what is now New Mexico in the U.S. The Spanish themselves seem to have helped the game in its diffusion, unaware of its presence. It is clearly with the Spaniards that the *patol* game, sometimes also called *quince* (fifteen), reached the American Southwest and settled in the Pueblo and the Zuñi countries.

It is there that some newcomers, coming from the North or from the Great Plains, and getting in contact with the Pueblos in the 18th century, found the game and took it over. The Kiowas and Kiowa Apaches are noted for their *zohn ahl* (or *tsoñä*) game, while the Arapahos call it *ne’bäku’thana*. A careful examination of *zohn ahl* shows that it has kept the basic features of an ancient game that came—in Spanish times—from Mexico and may have been popular in Teotihuacan times. Its spread northward—through the Tarascan country—is, hopefully, well documented.

Mind games usually spread rapidly and far away. Even in antiquity there are examples of such a wide cultural transmission (de Voogt, Dunn-Vaturi, Eerkens 2013). Mesoamerica—that is, the region where the Aztec and Maya civilisations flourished sharing many significant traits, mostly coming from the Olmecs (from c.1200 BC to c.400 BC)—is no exception. I want to show here how a board game from Teotihuacan, the great civilisation that occupied the Mexican plateau between 100 and 650 AD, long before the Aztecs, spread westwards, then, after some simplifications, northwards, following well established routes.

## “Zohn Ahl”

“Zohn Ahl” (Figure 1) is a ‘classic’ game, which is described in many books about board games, from Culin (first in Culin 1896) to any recent “Games of the world” and other “Big Board Game Book”. It is to be found in websites devoted to historical race games. Culin called it ‘zohn ahl’, although in the following page, his second informant, James Mooney, prefers to spell it *tsoñä*. In the Kiowa language it means ‘creek+wood’ (but Mooney again says *tsoñ* means ‘awl’, and *tsoñä* ‘the awl game’...).

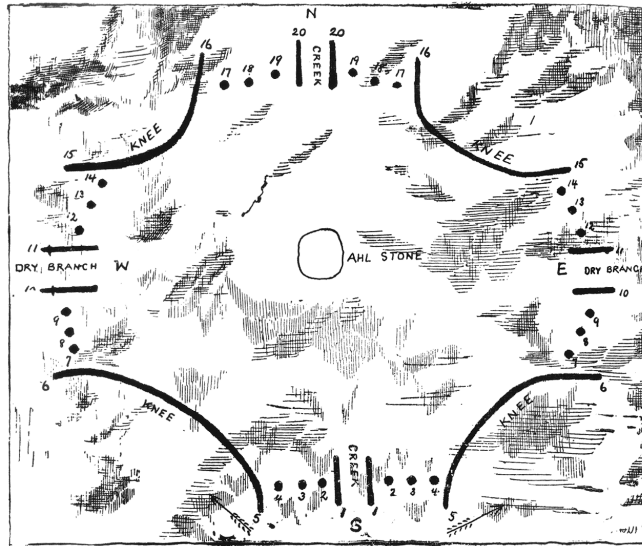


Figure 1: Zohn Ahl

The game is clearly a kind of simple race game where the dice are four sticks, made of wood, one side rounded, the other flat and grooved. These sticks are projected against a flat stone placed in the center of the gameboard so that the sticks would bounce. The way the stick dice fall gives the number of points needed, according to a chart: if all the sticks fall with the sides without grooves uppermost it counts 10. If all grooved sides come uppermost it counts 5. Both throws allow the player to play again. But if one grooved side is uppermost, it is 1; two grooved sides make 2, and three, 3. Two players or two teams—in this part of the world it is usual to play in teams—play against each other. Each player, or team, owns a kind of awl which is stuck in the starting point, on both sides of the South creek. Just quoting Col. H. L. Scott's report in Culin's *Games of the North American Indians* (Culin 1907, pp. 125–126):

The player A makes the first throw ... each side counting the results of each throw on the “ahl” cloth by sticking its awl just beyond the mark called for by the results of the throw. [...] If in counting any awl gets into the creek at North, that side must forfeit a counter to the other side and be set back to the creek at South. [...] If in their passage around the circle the two awls get into the same division, the last comer is said to whip or kill the

former, who forfeits a counter and is set back at South. [...] The one first at South receives a counter [...]. When one side wins all the counters it conquers.

Col. Scott added (again quoted by Culin): “The Comanche have a similar game which they play with eight ahl sticks [instead of four], and the Cheyenne and Arapaho are said to have a game which they play with ahl sticks which are 2 feet or more long.” According to Mooney, the game was “universally popular with the prairie tribes”; it was, however, “becoming obsolete in the north, but it is the everyday summer amusement of the women among the Kiowa, Comanche and Apache in the southern plains”.

A quick analysis shows that it is a game of mere chance: with only one gamepiece the player (or team) is fully dependent on the throws of the dice. No individual decision can change the course of the game. There is no strategy. This consideration does explain why Culin simply categorized tsoñä and related games as “dice games”, without differentiating them from true dice games. For Culin and some of his sources, the gameboard was just a “counting device” for keeping the score as won in the throws, a kind of large clock dial.

Like the Comanches, Cheyennes, Arapahos, the Kiowas and Kiowa Apaches belong to what is called the Plains Culture, characterized by the horse, the buffalo, the tipi, and the Sun Dance. It is not clear where they come from. Kiowa tradition says they came from the north near Montana. The fact that they speak a language of the Tanoan group suggests they originally came from New Mexico. It is possible that they migrated north long ago and then back again to western Oklahoma and northeast New Mexico during the 18th century (Meadows 2008, p. 246). They engaged in trading with the Pueblo Indians who lived in south New Mexico along the Rio Grande river. So it is no surprise to find the same game there, not on a cloth or a skin but set on the ground with stones to mark the ‘stations’, generally forty in number. Indeed, most of the Rio Grande gameboards are circular, while a few ones are square, the number of ‘stations’ still being forty.

## The Quince/Patol Game

Neighbours of the Pueblo Indians, like the Zuñis, the Western Apaches, and further West, in Arizona, the Havasupais (Figure 2), Walapais, Maricopas and others, have the same kind of race game.

Here is how Harold Murray introduced it in his 1952 book (Murray 1952, pp. 150–151):



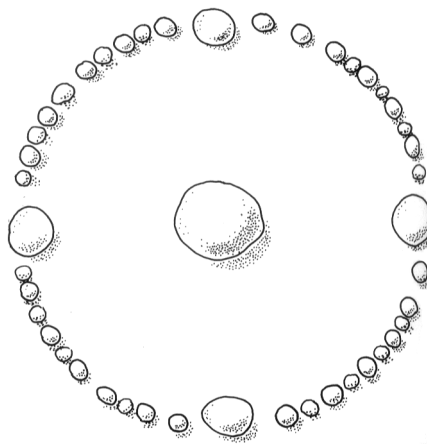
Most of the American Indian tribes in U.S.A. [meaning the Southwest!] and Mexico [here too, as we shall see, the Northwest] play, with small differences in rule, a game which is said to have been originally divinatory, as it still is with some tribes. The board is sometimes marked on a piece of cloth or hide, but more often set out on the ground in the form of a hollow circle or square, from 3 to 5 feet across [0.90–1.50 m]. In the centre of the diagram is placed a flat stone, [...] and in throwing the staves they must hit this stone and bounce off it. When the board on the ground is circular, the circumference is marked by forty stones at equal intervals along it, except that each quadrant of ten stones is separated from its neighbours by a larger interval which is known as gate, door, river, or creek and marks a point of entry for the men. [...] Two persons, or four forming two sides, usually play, and each side has one or two men, commonly known as horses, which are entered on the track and traverse the track a prescribed number of times and finish at the gate by which they entered. [...] The moves are given by the throw of three or four staves, [...]. The staves are usually pieces of split cane, one flat side and the other round and often also coloured.



**Figure 2:** Havasupai girls playing the game of stick dice (from Culin 1907)

Another remarkable feature of this game is that, besides its native name, it is often known as *quince* (Spanish for ‘fifteen’) or *patol*, a Nahuatl word reminiscent of the Aztec game *patolli* although there is no obvious relationship between the latter and the former. For example, the Santa Clara Tewa, in New

Mexico, call their game *tugi-épfe* or *quince* (Culin 1907, pp. 193–194; Murray 1952, p. 153); the Nambé Tewas, a few kilometres farther, call it *tugea*, an obviously similar name, and also *patol* (Culin 1907, pp. 192–193; Murray 1952, p. 153). The Laguna Keres, west of the Rio Puerco river, say *owasokotz*, *owasakut*, *kawásukuts*, *wasokutz* or... *patol* (Culin 1907, pp. 121–123; Murray 1952, pp. 152–153). While the Zuñis have their *sholiwe* or *tasholiwe* (Figure 3), and the Navajos their *tsedil* (eight different spellings!), the Maricopas in Arizona play a curious variant just called *quince* (Spier 1933, pp. 342–343). However, if we carefully compare the rules and shapes of these games,



**Figure 3:** Sholiwe (Zuñi)

we can see there are striking geographical (and probably ethnic) variations: while most Pueblo Indians, the Zuñis and the Navajos use three stick dice only, the Pima and Papago (or Tohono O’odham) further south have four. We will soon see that four sticks is indeed a kind of “standard” number in Mexico. There is also a change in shape: if some Pueblos have a round board, most if not all Indians near the Mexican border play on a square board. (Spier 1928, pp. 341–351 offers a good overview of the distribution of the game in the South-West.)

Should we now move southward? The present frontier between the U.S. and Mexico has, of course, no particular relevance. Apache, Pima, Papago Indians live on both sides, and most anthropologists consider today the Mexican Northwest, or *Noroeste*, as part of a “larger Southwest”—a culture area which was first devised before the second World War (Kroeber 1939), and has tentatively been called ‘Oasis America’ by Paul Kirchhoff (Kirchhoff

1954). Indeed the Mexican states of Sonora and Chihuahua are hosts of Indian groups who have a patol/quince game, or used to have one, thus offering strong similarities with what we have observed in Arizona and New Mexico. Further south, we meet a quince game, called *romayá* as well, among the Tarahumaras.

Let us have a look at the Papago and Pima game. Papago and Upper Pima (or Pima Alto) Indians live in southern Arizona near the Mexican frontier. They have clearly received a strong Spanish influence, but they have kept their own traditions. Their quince game, as noted by Culin, and other later anthropologists, seems to be somewhat more elaborated.

Not only do they use four stick dice, but these dice have one side marked thus: one has four spots or notches, another has six spots or some marking meaning 6, the third one has a more complex design supposed to represent 14, and the last one has a zigzag pattern that represents 15 (Figure 4), whence the name of the game: *quince*, or in Pima *kints* (*kints kut*) (Culin 1907, pp. 146–152; W. N. Smith 1945; Murray 1952, p. 155). The gameboard is a little more complex with its two curved branches starting from two of the corners. These extra tracks are the starting places for the players or teams (Figure 5). Lastly, we learn that each player or team may have one OR two pieces, here too called ‘horse(s)’. More often two, it seems. But that makes a big change: with two men, the players must decide which piece they want to move. This is the beginning of strategy.

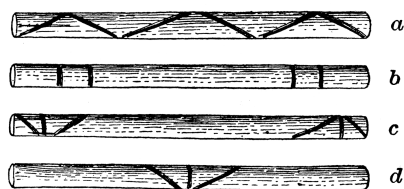


Figure 4: Papago stick dice

The Pima game is almost identical to the Tarahumara *romayá*—also known as *quince* (Culin 1907, p. 152; Murray 1952, p. 155; Bennett and Zingg 1935, 343–4, Fig. 5–6; Pennington 1963, pp. 175–176; López Batista 1992). The latter is still played, particularly during the Holy Week, thanks to the Federación Mexicana de Juegos y Deportes Autóctonos y Tradicionales de México (FMJDAT), which helps maintaining it, and we know it pretty well. It was first described in the late 18th century by Father Matthäus Steffel in his “Tarahumarisches Wörterbuch” (Steffel 1791).

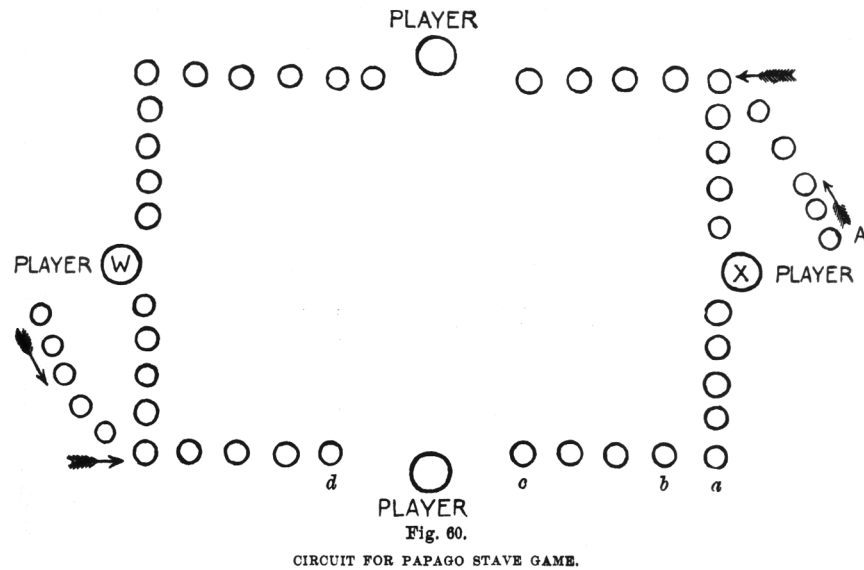


Figure 5: Papago gameboard

A very similar game, although simpler and thus much closer to the Pueblos game is to be found among the Tepehuas of Chihuahua. It has forty holes, with two extra curved tracks. The stick dice are the same, but one piece per side is allowed so making it a game of pure chance. The Tepehuas call it *suligari*, or *quince* or *patole* (*patoles* in the 18th century) (Culin 1907, pp. 153–154; Murray 1952; Pennington 1963, pp. 172–173). Still further south we find the same game, with its two arms inside the rectangular track, played in the state of Michoacán. The same complex count with the same kind of stick dice, here in a modern rendition (Figure 6) is used for a simple game with one piece per side. The game is called *t'embini iumu* ('fifteen' in Purépecha) or, in Spanish, *quince*, *quinzas* or even *palillos* (little sticks) (Ortega Rangel n.d.; FMJDAT). The game is still so popular among Indian immigrants in the U.S. (particularly in North Carolina) that tournaments are organized there! However, Michoacán offers some other outstanding games. The most intriguing is that, found in the early 1940s by anthropologists Pedro Carrasco and Ralph Beals in Angahuan, a remote Tarascan village, called *kolicha* ('five') or *k'uilichi*, which has a definite similar outlook but offers a much more complex design and gameplay (Figure 7) (Beals and Carrasco 1944). It was identified by the two authors as "a version of quince or patolli", although in this game the players have four pieces each and follow a track that is not



**Figure 6:** *T'embini iumu*

the same as the opponent's, since two arms of the inner cross are reserved to each. In other words, the two players never stop on the same points on this inner cross; they have, however, the opportunity to meet on the outer track, and when they do, the arriving piece “kills” the one in place, which must go back to the start. The whole circuit each player has to follow has 52 points, a well-known figure in Mesoamerican cosmogony. (It is a ‘century’.) The four corner points and the central one are dangerous places: if a piece comes to rest on any of these places it is ‘burned’ and, according to the same rule, it must go back to its starting point. The count of the dice is reminiscent of what we have seen among the Tarahumaras and Tepehuas, and up to the north, among the Pimas and Papagos. However, the Tarascan system is more complicated, offering higher numbers—3, 5, 10, 15, 20, 35—according to a precise pattern of up and down sides (Figure 8). In their 1944 article Beals and Carrasco added that the game was “played especially during the rainy season” and on the Assumption, that is, on the 15th of August.

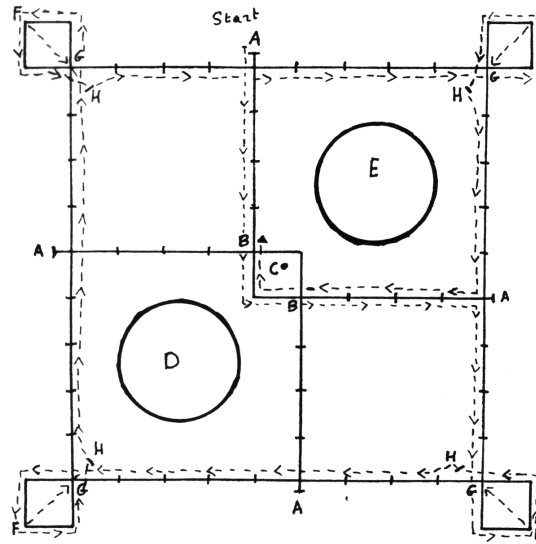


Figure 7: K'uilichi

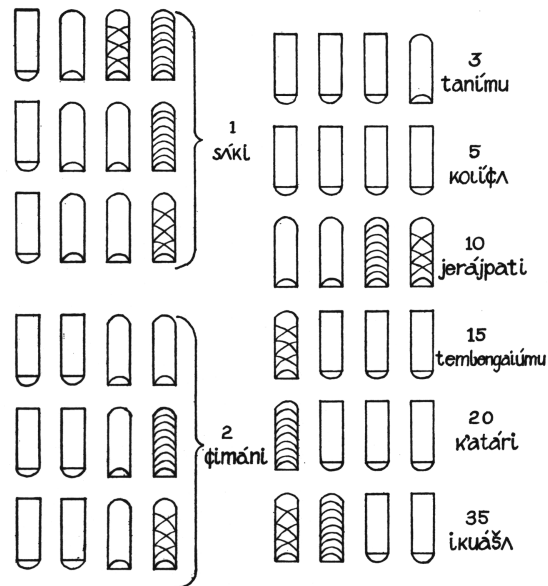
Figure 5. Scoring methods used for *k'olcaldkua* or quince.

Figure 8: K'uilichi dice positions

## Another Kind of Patolli

What Beals and Carrasco were not aware of is that this very gameboard design had already been found incised in some archaeological sites as far as Belize, the easternmost place of the Mesoamerican area. A few Precolumbian codices too offer the same very recognisable diagram. In his 1978 book *L'esprit du jeu chez les Aztèques* ("The spirit of play among the Aztecs": Duverger 1978) French Americanist Christian Duverger had a chapter called "Other games of chance"—other than Patolli, the X-shaped game of the Aztecs (Figure 9)—in which he described "a curious alternatively black and white cell structure, under which are placed four beans" that was to be found in various Aztec and non-Aztec Precolumbian codices (Borgia, Vaticanus B, Aubin Tonalamatl, Vindobonensis, Borbonicus...).



Figure 9: Aztec Patolli

In this structure, which is often associated with carefully arranged beans and sticks, Duverger did not hesitate to see a board game. Indeed such boards appear to be incised in some archaeological sites, at Tula, the Toltec capital, Teotihuacan, and even Palenque and Copan, in the Maya area. Curiously Duverger was not aware of Beals and Carrasco's article. His view was that it was an Aztec game, and therefore, that it must have had an Aztec name. He came to believe it was the Nahuatl word *quauhpatolli* which was translated as 'chess' in the earliest, 16th-century dictionary of the Nahuatl language, Alonso de Molina's *Vocabulario en la lengua castellana y mexicana*, published at Mexico City in 1555. *Quauhpatolli* can be split in two roots, *quauitl* 'tree, wood' + *patolli* 'dice game', so literally meaning 'wood





Figure 10: K'uilichi in Codex Borgia

patolli'. However, this explanation has not been widely accepted, and we are still at loss about the real name the Aztecs gave this game.

A few years later, two archaeologists, one American, William Swezey (1933–1989), and one Danish, Bente Bittman (1929–1997), published a long article in Spanish entitled “El rectángulo de cintas y el patolli: nueva evidencia de la antigüedad, distribución, variedad y formas de practicar este juego precolombino” (The band—or ribbon—rectangle and Patolli: new evidence of the antiquity, distribution, variety and gameplays of this Precolumbian game) (Swezey and Bittman 1983). Although it had been preceded by A. Ledyard Smith’s careful listing in his contribution to Sir Eric Thompson festschrift (Smith, A. L. 1977), this is still the best study about the mystery game of the codices. In their work Swezey and Bittman call the game ‘proto-patolli’. More recently some have called it ‘square[d] patolli’, although, as we shall see, there are circular ones. Yet there is no clear appellation: patolli is



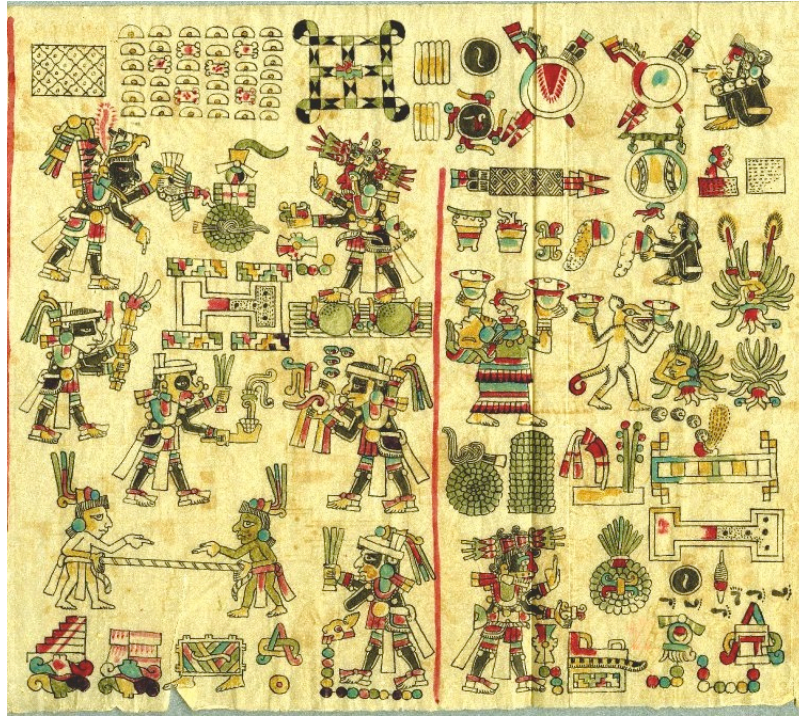


Figure 11: K'uilichi in Codex Vindobonensis

Nahuatl and does mean a very particular Aztec game which, if indeed related to the older square game, is different in shape and rules. There is no evidence that the Aztec game derives from the earlier game, and 'proto-patolli' is in my view a misleading expression. It is better to give to it its Tarascan, or Purépecha, name, *k'uilichi*. We shall see that this is not mistaken.

William Swezey and Bente Bittman have gathered what is the most comprehensive, though in no way definitive, collection of incised and/or painted gameboards. They have identified three types, according to shape and details. All retain the inside cross, with a chequered pattern; they more or less offer the same number of cells; some have looped corners, but others are simple rectangles with a cross.

– Type I (Figure 12) has the "classic" shape (as it is found in the codices), with 'looped' corners; it is also the same board as the modern Tarascan game *k'uilichi*. It is perhaps the oldest, since such diagrams were found at Teotihuacán (AD 4th–7th cent.), but also the longest lasting game since it is still played in Michoacán.

(Teotihuacán is the name of an area north of Mexico City, where lie the ruins of an immense city that flourished between the 2nd and 7th centuries AD. It is considered as the ‘classic’ civilisation of central Mexico, long before the Aztecs.)

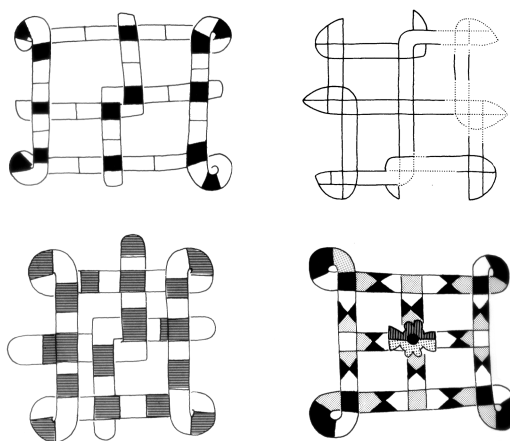
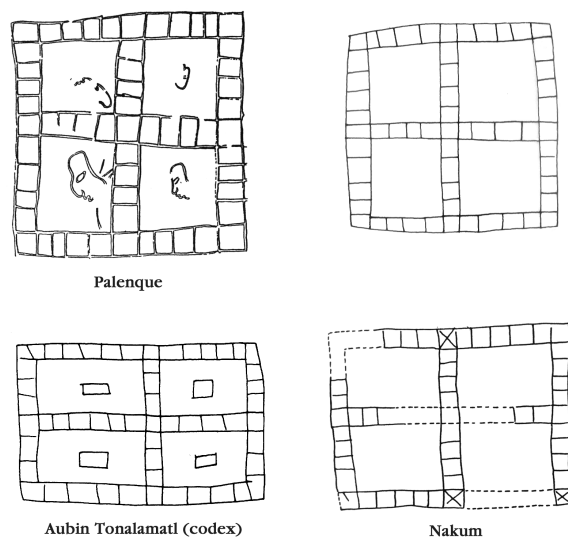


Figure 12: Type I

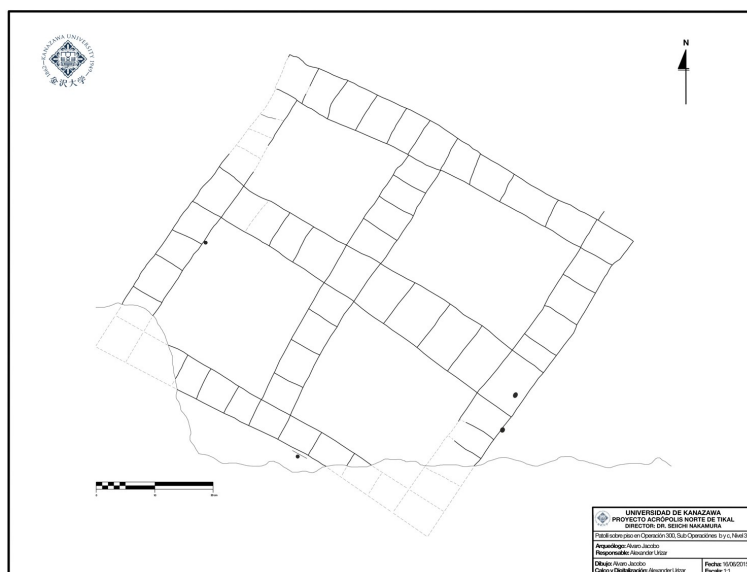
- Type II (Figure 13) has a simpler shape, with no ‘looped’ corners; because it is mainly found at Tula and in Maya sites that show Toltec influence (like Palenque), it was supposed to be a Toltec form, but recent discoveries made in Copán and Tikal yielded much earlier examples. In Copán, in the Yax and Mot Mot structures, gameboards would date back to “approximately 445”, while in Tikal a recent discovery (May 2015) of a further Type II board would be dated between 250 and 550 AD (Figure 14)<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, it is tempting to conclude that Type II games are a Maya speciality. They seem to be contemporary to the Type I gameboards found in Teotihuacán.
- Type III (Figure 15), lastly, is circular, but the arms of the cross end with ‘loops’; it seems to be a purely Maya variant (7th–9th cent. AD).

All sites are pre-Aztec, and none offers the cross-shaped board typical of patolli. Although it is difficult to understand in which direction the game spread, from Teotihuacán to Maya lands, or perhaps the other way round, it is clear this game, like the ball game and many other traits, is common to the Mesoamerican area. This conclusion was also drawn by Egyptologist Timothy Kendall in a remarkable booklet, *Patolli: a game of ancient*

<sup>1</sup>From <http://mcd.gob.gt/se-realiza-en-peten-presentacion-de-hallazgo-arqueologico-maya>, accessed 15/11/2015.



**Figure 13:** Type II



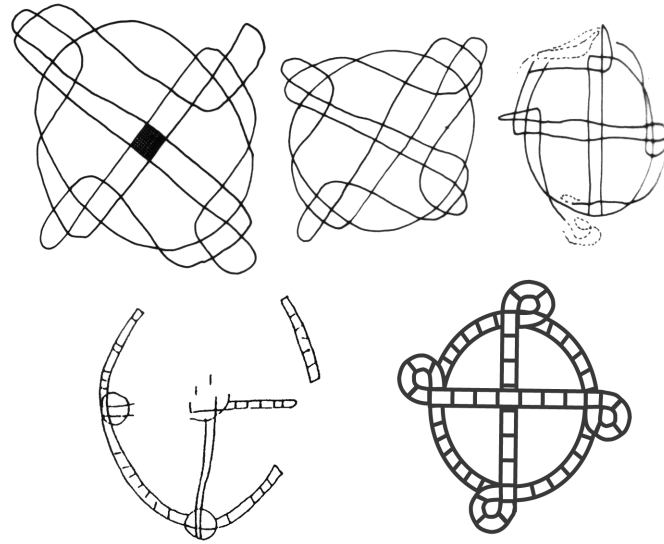


Figure 15: Type III

*Mexico*, published with a cardboard game in 1983 too (Kendall 1980). Although the book was mainly devoted to Aztec patolli, Kendall could not resist adding a chapter on a possible ancestor which was revealed by archaeological excavations in Mexico, Guatemala and even Belize. Amazingly Kendall seems to have never heard of Beals and Carrasco's article, nor was he aware of Duverger's book. Of course he could not have heard of Swezey and Bittman.

Kendall mentions "over 25 examples", which he had found listed in Smith's publication. Swezey and Bittman add a few more. About ten new diagrams have been uncovered in the following twenty-five years. (And a further forty found in Michoacán.)

Among these later finds I have to report those from Copán (Honduras and Guatemala). Structure 10L-26 revealed no less than four diagrams (two "graffiti patolli boards" in the building called Yax, two further ones in the structure called Mot Mot (Williamson 1996). Unfortunately Williamson's paper of 1993 does not give any detail about the gameboards, nor any picture, so it is difficult to assign them a type. In all case, due to the dating of the Yax and Mot Mot structures where they were found, "approximately 445", they would be earlier than those found in the nearby "Rosalila" Temple.

More recently, the spectacular “Rosalila” Temple at Copán yielded “some squared patolli boards, one with a gaming piece in situ. This structure date to 571 AD.” This new information was sent me some time ago by Irving Finkel, whom I thank. I believe these “squared patolli boards” belong to Type II. I eagerly await to see “the in situ gaming piece”. Certainly a premiere.

In all these diagrams the center square has some special marking. In the simple Type II games it is a small cross; in the more complex Type I and Type III boards, the cross forms a central loop which can be related to the glyph *ollin*, also used as a symbol, meaning both ‘centre’ and ‘bouncing movement’, from *ol* ‘rubber’. This is a clear link with the Northern-Mexican and Southwestern American Indian games where the players have to strike a central stone with their stick dice to make them bounce.

In their study Swezey and Bittman concluded that “it is possible that the gameboards from Tula represent an heritage from the culture of Teotihuacán, although it is important to note that our Type II is not found at Teotihuacán. Therefore, one can suggest that Type II is a Toltec [actually Maya] adaptation of the Teotihuacán gameboards” (Swezey and Bittman 1983, p. 403). Type II and Type III boards are only found in the Maya area.

## A Western Diagram and the Tarascan Hypothesis

As the map shows (Figure 16) most gameboards of the type described have been found in Central Mexico (Type I) and Yucatan (Types II and III), leaving the West as a kind of “desert”. Were it not the presence of the modern Tarascan *k’uulichí*, we would think the game had never spread westwards. However, in 1977, archaeologists were fortunate to find a nice Type I diagram (Figure 17), complete, carved on rock, at Tomatlán, in the western state of Jalisco. Joseph Mountjoy and John P. Smith, who have published it in 1985 (J. B. Mountjoy and J. P. Smith 1985), were perfectly aware of the other games and thus they could relate it to the group of boards, painted or incised, found eastward. A petroglyph is always very difficult to date. Mountjoy and Smith think the diagram is Prehispanic, and they suggest it would date from the Postclassic period, that is, between 1000 and 1500 AD.

Jalisco is not far from Michoacán where the ancient Tarascans had build a kingdom which resisted all Aztec attacks and settled an original civilisation, although based on the same traits as all Mesoamerican cultures: ball-game, temple pyramids, human sacrifices, feather artifacts—the Tarascans were famous for their featherwork—to which they added metalwork.



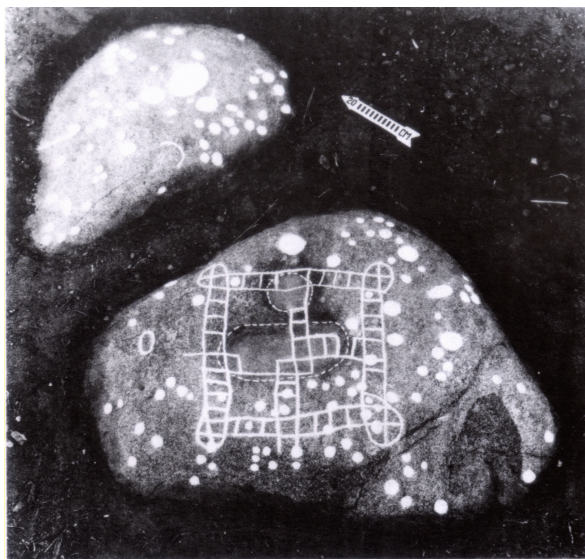
**Figure 16:** Map showing where ‘Proto-Patolli’ gameboards have been found

The heyday of the Tarascan civilisation took place during the same Post-classic period. It is said that their first capital, Pátzcuaro, was founded on the lake of the same name in 1325. It was later replaced by Ihuàtzio and lastly by Tzintzuntzan. Not only were the Tarascans excellent craftsmen but they were also good salesmen. They exported plume ornaments, tools and bronze bells up to the Rio Grande valley, in exchange for local goods.

Since the beginning of this century local archaeologists have found tens of gameboards incised on rocks or stones in the central area of the old Tarascan Kingdom. In his MA thesis Alejandro Gregorio Olmos Curiel (Olmos Curiel 2010) says that some twenty-four gameboards were found in Michoacán, and that he can add a further fifteen from Tzintzuntzan! They all belong to Type 1.

There is only one written record of any game played by the Tarascans. In the celebrated *Relación de Michoacán*, edited by Fray Jerónimo de Alcalá in around 1540 from local sources (Jerónimo de Alcalá 1988), it is said that, on his way back from Mexico City, where he had met Cortés, *cazonci* (king) Tangaxuan II Tzintzicha played *patol* with his dignitaries. We know *patol* is a common name for a simple board game we have met from Michoacán to the Great Plains.

It is therefore very tempting to hypothesize that the Tarascans took



**Figure 17:** Type I gameboard found in Tomatlán, Jalisco

over a central Mexican board game which had been around since Teotihuacan times. In the earliest dictionary of Purépecha, Maturino Gilberti's (i.e. Mathurin Gilbert) *Vocabulario en lengua de Mechuacan*, published in Mexico in 1559 (Gilberti 2004), the generic word for game is *chanagua* (now spelled *ch'anakua*). 'Juego de fortuna' is translated as *vapacuqua chanagua*, where *vapacuqua* (now *uapakukua*) means dice. I contend this *vapacuqua chanagua* was the Purépecha name for a kind of 'patolli', perhaps the same as modern *k'uilichi*, i.e. *k'uilichi ch'anakua*. It is a fact a game using a Type I board has survived among the Tarascans. It must have been preserved by some communities during centuries while a simplified form evolved, where the central cross and some gamepieces were taken off, keeping the four stick dice and their special count. Reduced to one piece per player it came to be called *patol* in Nahuatl, the lingua franca of the time, which the Tarascans may have used too on their way to the north. I think it is the Tarascans who have spread this simplified form of the game along a route which they had somewhat revived on the west coast of Mexico. *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas, II: Mesoamerica* has this to say:

in the Early Postclassic [10th–12th centuries], the coastal trade route, although used in the turquoise trade, also was used to distribute the knowledge of copper metallurgy to the U.S. South-



west and throughout Western Mexico. It also served to bring cotton, cotton textiles, and parrots to the north, and very likely lead, tin, and perhaps gold. [...] By the Late Postclassic [13th–15th centuries], the Tarascans took over these routes, cutting off their eastern or Central Mexican branch [which reached the Aztec territory], and developed their own connection with the U.S. Southwest. (Gorenstein 1996, p. 347)

It must be at this time that the patol family of games began to spread northwards. When the Spanish arrived, they also used this coastal route and gave it a new impulse. It is through it that Francisco Vázquez de Coronado and his army reached Sonora and the U.S. Southwest in 1540–42. It is highly possible that Indian attendants, perhaps from Michoacán, brought the ‘patol’ game with them.

## Patol/Quince goes to the North

It is striking to see how the game is reported from place to place after the Spanish conquest. In New Galicia (now the state of Jalisco), a report of 1584 says the Indian played a game called *patolo* “...which consists of four sticks [thrown] on the ground upon some lines” (“un juego que llaman patolo ...que es con quatro cañuelas en el sole sobre unas rayas...”) (Acuña 1987, p. 306). In 1602 a Jesuit noticed a game the Acaxeos, a mountain tribe of Durango and Sinaloa, played. It was called *patole*, used a square board, with ‘doors’, and four stick dice (“cuatro cañas abiertas”). When a player fell in one of these doors he was ‘burned’ and had to start again (Beals 1933, p. 14). A little further north, on the coast, the Cahitas had “A form of patoli or quince [which] was a popular game played only in summer. [...] The game was played with four split-cane dice, each marked differently...” (Beals 1943, pp. 35–6). In Sinaloa too, according to Andrés Pérez de Ribas’ *Historia de los triumphos de nuestra santa Fe entre gentes las más bárbaras* (Madrid, 1645), the Indians played a simple dice game they called *patoli* using four sticks and shells as tokens. Although there is no gameboard involved, it must have taken its name from an actual board game.

There are many more reports from northern Mexico. Around 1740, we know the Tepehuas had a “juego de los patoles”, while the Tarahumara game, as we have seen, was observed as early as the 18th century, first by Father Joseph Ochs, who lived there between 1754 and 1768 (Kendall 1980, 12 and fn. 18), then by Father Matthäus Steffel (Steffel 1791). Near the present border between Mexico and the U.S. a group called Eudeves, now





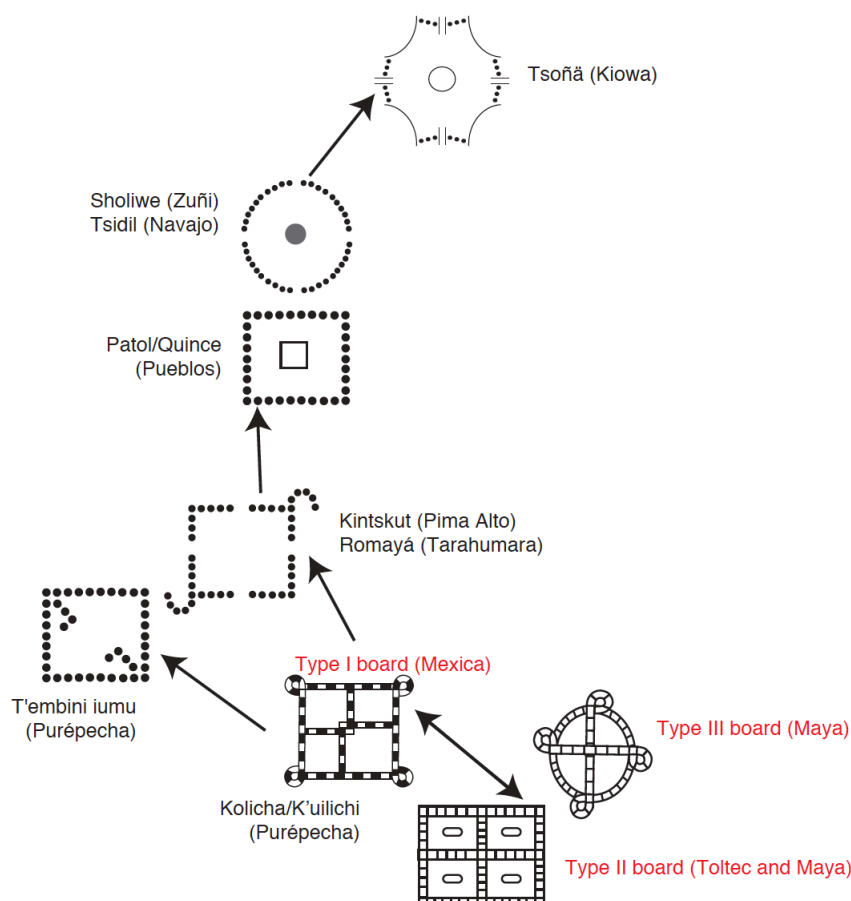
**Figure 18:** Map of ethnic distribution in Western Mexico

extinct, saw its language preserved into an *Arte y vocabulario* right in the 17th century. In this work we find: “Patole. El juego. *tecórina*. Jugar al patole. *tecóran*, *zeméguan*. Se muere por jugar al patole. *zeméguamucún*.” (Pennington, C. W. (ed.) 1981, p. 143). There are no details on the game, and it may well have been a simple dice game just like with the Sinaloa Indians. But the word was there. Even as far north as in the Pueblo of San Juan, in the Rio Grande valley, one could hear in 1632 of a dice game called *patole* or *patoles*, which consisted of small reeds (*cañuelas*) thrown upon a mat (*petate*) (Scholes 1935).

Most records of colonial times (17th–18th century) which mention a dice game on the western coast of Mexico call it *patol[e]*. It is also the most common name used by the Rio Grande Pueblos. However, more recent witnesses (late 19th and early 20th centuries) use the Spanish word *quince* instead

(likely to be the literal translation of Purépecha *témbeni iúmu* ‘fifteen’). It therefore seems that the game was first spread under its Nahuatl name *patol*, then, perhaps by the end of the 18th century or the beginning of the 19th, the Spanish term *quince* prevailed; in all case, it was already known in the Mexican Noroeste when the Papagos and the Pimas adopted the game, for they call it *ghingskoot*, *kints kut*, *kingskoot*, *gince goot*, a word that is clearly derived from *quince* (*kingskut* ‘game of fifteen’, where *kins* is Spanish *quince*). In the early 18th century the Tepehuans named it *suligarague* which Benito Rinaldini (*Arte de la lengua tepeguana*, Mexico City, 1743) glossed “juego de los patoles”; afterwards, like with the Tarahumaras, the game was renamed *quince*. Among the Rio Grande Pueblos, only the Santa Clara Tewa call the game *quince*. (But Culin 1907, p. 194, who says the game is so called because one stick has 15 ‘transverse notches’, explains that, in the Tewa language, the game is called *tadipwanopfe* ‘juego de pastor’.) It is remarkable that neither the Zuñis, nor the Hopis, nor the Navajos have borrowed these terms and that they call their games with names of their own.

However, the later use of the Spanish word *quince* (‘fifteen’) bears evidence of Spanish influence. It is highly probable that the simplified game travelled from South (Michoacán) to North (New Mexico) mainly during the Spanish conquest and that it was introduced in the Rio Grande valley by Mexican Indians in the service of the Spaniards, as Carroll Riley has suggested (Riley 1995, p. 217). In this process, it is striking to observe how over time and distance the game evolved (Figure 19), losing more and more elements in the process, first its central cross, here its four corner loops, there what remained of them, being finally reduced to a simple circle of stones with a central boulder, a few stick dice and one ‘horse’ per side.



**Figure 19:** Evolution of the game's shape

Boardgames are versatile. In the process of time and transmission they can be modified, “enriched” or simplified. We have here the example of such a process. That the so-called ‘proto-patolli’ has spread to the Tarascan kingdom, perhaps during its early Classic period (c.1000 AD), under Toltec influence, seems easy to understand. The game appears to have reached some sort of ‘national’ status there, and in their turn the Tarascans have spread it. But they have designed a simplified version, reducing the circuit, and also the number of gamepieces, now limited to one for each player. It is this last form which seems to have been the most successful outside the

Tarascan sphere of influence. It is probably with the coming of the Spanish that the simplified game found its way to the north, and later to the Great Plains.



Figure 20: Transmission mapped

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