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Board Games and Social Space at Aphrodisias: The View from the Theatre

Aphrodisias'ta Oyun Tablaları ve Sosyal Mekân: Tiyatro'dan Bir Bakış

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Abstract

Gameboards carved into stone surfaces are common in Roman, Late Antique, and Medieval cities, yet their archaeological study is still in its early development. While early research focused on reconstructing game rules, recent scholarship has explored the social significance of gaming. However, the lack of systematic recording hampers our understanding of these everyday activities. This article presents initial findings from a new project analysing the numerous gameboards and related markings at Aphrodisias. Focusing on the city's theatre, it explores how gameboards in the *cavea* and the stage suggest that the theatre was frequently used for recreation outside of times when mass spectacles were taking place. Rather than competing with theatrical entertainment, gaming complemented the theatre's role as a social hub.

Keywords: Aphrodisias, Roman archaeology, gameboards, social space, play

Öz

Taş yüzeylere kazınmış oyun tablaları, Roma, Geç Antik Çağ ve Orta Çağ kentlerinde yaygın olmakla birlikte bunların arkeolojik çalışmaları henüz erken gelişim aşamasındadır. İlk araştırmalar oyun kurallarını anlamaya odaklanırken son yıllarda yapılan çalışmalar oyunların toplumsal önemini incelemiştir. Ancak, sistematik belgelemenin yetersizliği, bu günlük faaliyetlerin anlaşılmasını zorlaştırmaktadır. Bu makale, Aphrodisias'ta bulunan çok sayıdaki oyun tablası ve oyunla ilgili işaretleri analiz eden yeni bir projenin ilk bulgularını sunarak, bunların mekânsal dağılımını ve toplumsal bağlamını ele almaktadır. Tiyatronun caveasında ve hatta sahnesinde bulunan oyun tablalarına odaklanarak, büyük çaplı gösterilerin düzenlendiği zamanların ötesinde de tiyatronun sıklıkla eğlence amaçlı kullanıldığını gösterdiği tartışılmaktadır. Oyunlar, tiyatro gösterileriyle rekabet etmek yerine, tiyatronun sosyal merkez olarak işlevini tamamlayan bir unsur olmuştur. Bu çalışma, antik oyun tablalarının kapsamlı bir şekilde belgelenmesi gerekliliğini vurgulamakta ve oyunların kamusal alan kullanımı ile Antik Çağ'da günlük yaşamı anlamaya dair sunduğu katkıları ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Aphrodisias, Roma arkeolojisi, oyun tahtaları, sosyal mekân, oyun

Board Games and Social Space at Aphrodisias: The View from the Theatre

Board games carved into floors, seats, and steps are common in Roman, late antique, and medieval urban centres. Despite the potential of these carvings to inform us about everyday life in the past, they have received little systematic study. Board game studies were, until recently, concerned with reconstructing ancient game rules (Dasen & Schädler, 2024). However, a growing body of work has drawn on observations, first made by Johan Huizinga in his seminal work Homo Ludens (1938[1949]), that play is a central feature of being human, and holds a key role in the formation of culture. Building on these foundations, the past decade has seen an explosion of research into the significance of games in past societies, which has explored who played games, where and when they played them, with what they played them, and what this tells us about social practices.

Despite the growing awareness that play in the past was important, major opportunities in ancient board game studies remain. Our understanding is held back by the lack of systematic collection and collation of archaeological evidence for carved gameboards in the ancient and post-antique world. Moreover, many gameboards would have been ephemeral, whether because they were marked out in paint or charcoal, or because they were made of portable, perishable materials, such as wood or cloth, and have not survived. We therefore rely heavily on a limited existing published record of gameboards carved in stone, though many, even at major sites, remain to be recorded and published.

This article presents some initial insights from a new project which systematically analyses the many hundreds of gameboards and related graphic markings found at Aphrodisias in Caria in the wider context of the built environment to investigate where, when, and how people played games in this ancient city. It first provides a brief introduction to the site and its topography, then focuses on the city's theatre, outlining the gameboards found there, and discussing the ways in which these can cast new light on the use of space within this public building. The distribution of gameboards—in the *cavea* and the stage itself—strongly suggests that the theatre was frequented for recreational activities when it was not in use for spectacles, and that was probably in part due to the shade which covered the theatre at some times of day as well as its central location within the city. Importantly, we should not think of gameboards as competing with the primary forms of entertainment which took place in this building: instead, the theatre played an important auxiliary role in the social life of the city—as a meeting place.

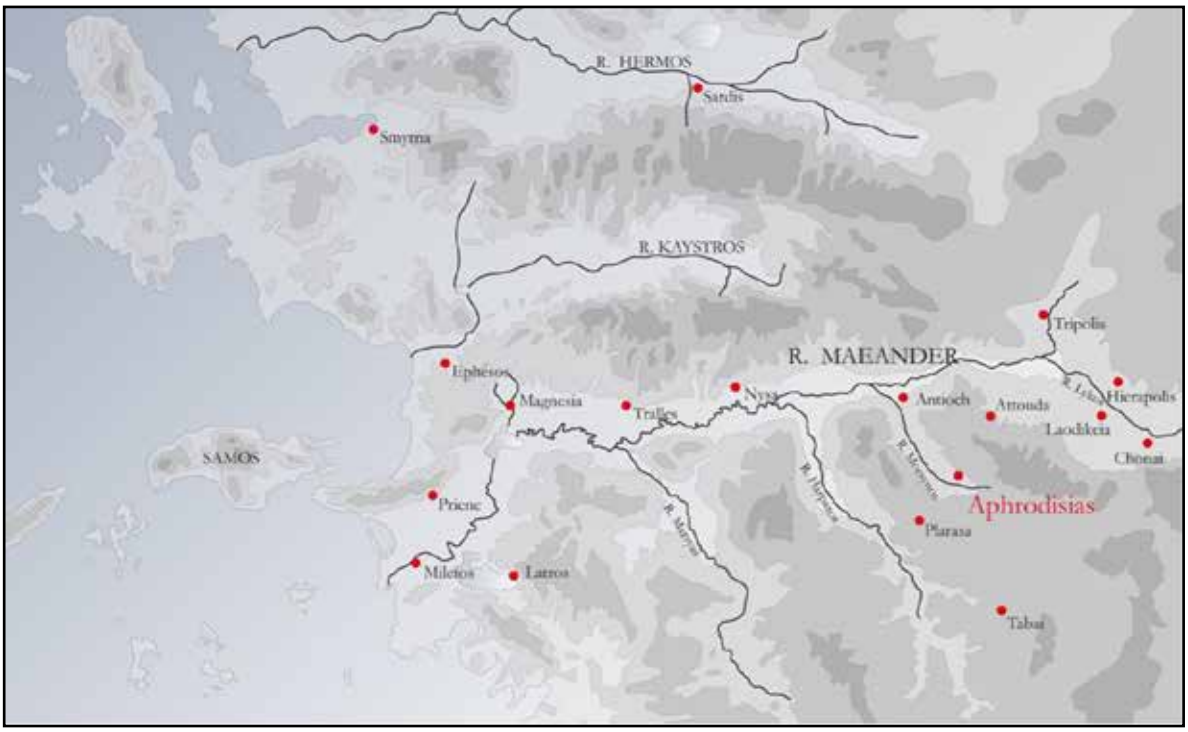
Aphrodisias

Site overview

Aphrodisias lies in the valley of the Morsynos, a tributary of the Meander (Map 1) in Caria (Southwest Türkiye). Since 1961, excavations at the site have been carried out under the direction of New York University, now in collaboration with the University of Oxford. Early campaigns uncovered several Imperial-Period monuments in the city centre. Today, scientific work at Aphrodisias continues to excavate, document, and study these finds, publish earlier results, conserve exposed remains, and ensure they are accessible to the public.

Figure 1

Map showing the location of Aphrodisias in the Meander valley



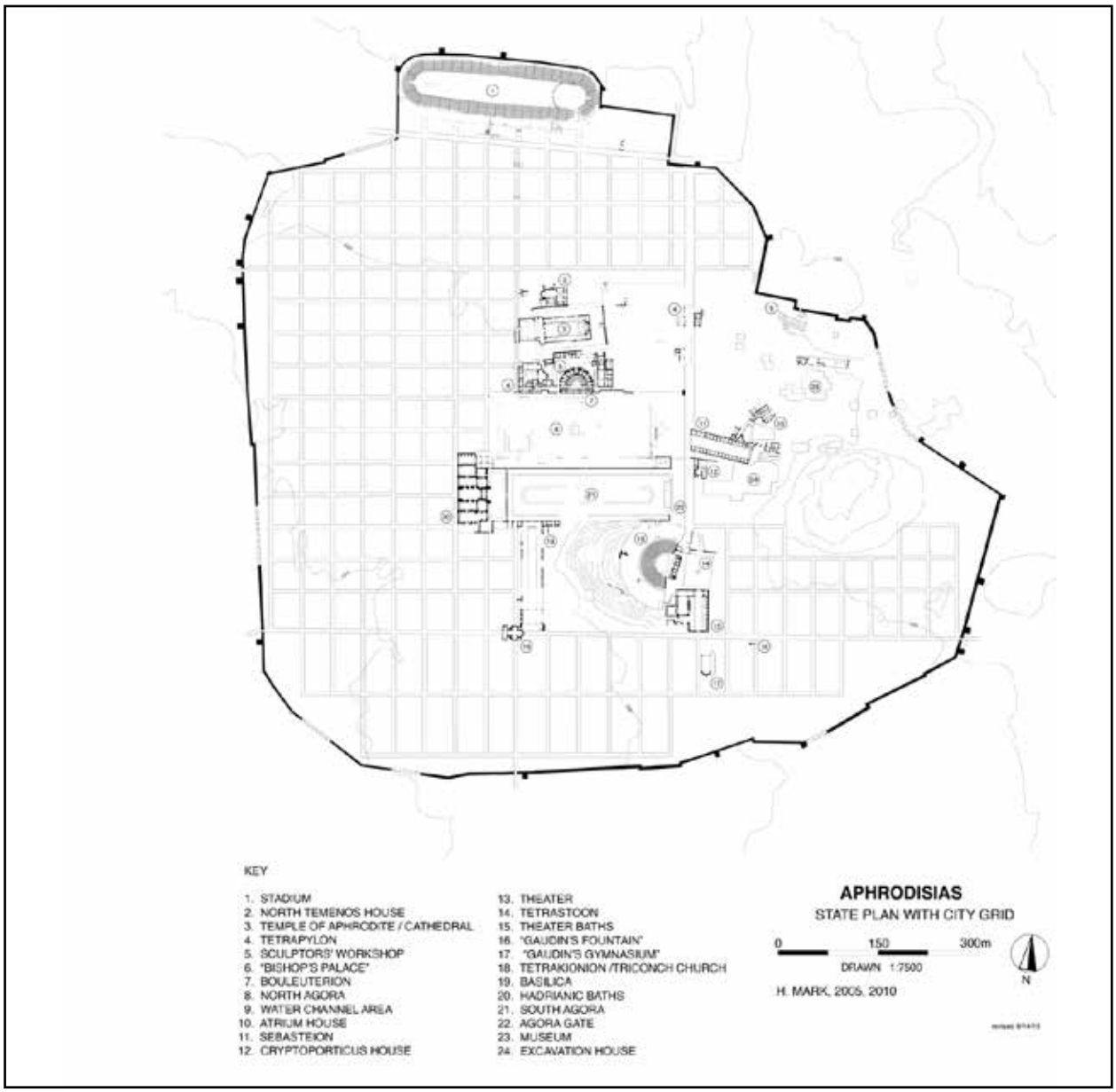
Note. Drawing by Harry Mark, © Aphrodisias Excavations.

The site was intermittently occupied from the 6th millennium BCE, with continuous habitation beginning by the 7th century BCE. Aphrodisias gained a regional significance from the Archaic Period onwards (Brody, 2007, p. 1; Ratté, 2008, pp. 28-29). A significant expansion of the settlement, along with the construction of monumental architecture, occurred in the 30s BCE, thanks to the initiative of C. Julius Zoilos, a wealthy freedman of Augustus (Ratté, 2008, p. 11). This development included monuments such as the stage building of the theatre, the Temple of Aphrodite, and the north stoa of the Agora (Map 2) (Ratté, 2002; Ratté, 2008, pp. 11-12). Over the following two centuries, a monumental city centre emerged, with the addition of further structures including the Bouleuterion, Stadium, the Hadrianic Baths, the Theatre baths, an urban park known as the Place of Palms, and the city's famous Tetrapylon. Many of these monuments are characterised by white marble quarried from sites outside the city (Rockwell, 1996; Russell, 2016).

By Late Antiquity, Aphrodisias had become the prosperous capital of the province of Caria. Through much of its life, the urban landscape underwent extensive redevelopment: our increasingly detailed understanding of the phasing of these redevelopments can help us to date graffiti, including gameboards, carved into them, as we will see below. For example, the complex encompassing the Theatre, the Tetrastoon, and Theatre Baths was refurbished probably in the reign of Julian the Apostate (r. 361-363 CE, see Roueché, 2004, XI.11). A major earthquake in the late 5th century CE caused significant damage, but the city managed to rebuild and restore much of its former splendour (see Wilson, 2018, pp. 476-484). Aphrodisias' urban structure remained largely in use until around 620 CE, when another earthquake caused widespread destruction (Wilson, 2022). Although the settlement was not abandoned and remained occupied through the Byzantine, Emirate, and Ottoman Periods, subsequent construction on and around the ruins was markedly different in character (Jeffery, 2022). From much of its long life—from the Late Hellenistic Period to Late Antiquity—Aphrodisias was a major centre of sculptural production and epigraphic recording, a fact which has allows for reconstruction of many aspects of life in the city through time.

Figure 2

Aphrodisias City Plan



Note. Drawing by Harry Mark, © Aphrodisias Excavations.

Previous Work on Gameboards at Aphrodisias

Aphrodisias is a key site for the study of board games in the ancient world thanks to the many hundreds of game boards and associated signs carved into pavements, steps, and seats there. Gameboards in the archaeological record are challenging to associate with specific games because, while ancient texts provide copious discussions of games, these discussions often tell us frustratingly little about the form of the boards on which games were played. Moving from the ample textual evidence for gaming towards an analysis of the material remains must therefore be

done with caution. To deal with this obstacle, previous work by Roueché and Bell at Aphrodisias provided the first modern typology of ancient boardgames (1993, pp. 249-252; 2007; 2014. For an expanded typology, see Pace et al., 2024).

Roueché studied the gameboards and related floor markings in selected areas of the city, most notably the Theatre and the Stadium, within the wider context of the graffiti habit, demonstrating the potential of this evidence to put people back into the urban landscape (Roueché, 1993, pp. 31-38, 84-117, 119-128; 2007a; 2014, pp. 139-141). While she provided detailed notes on the locations of some gameboards, Roueché did not present her data visually or analyse the spatial distribution of gameboards. Moreover, her recording was incomplete: for example, she noted only one of several gameboards on the theatre stage (Roueché, 1993, p. 36, 8a), nor did she discuss the significance of gameboards in this location. Roueché's data allowed Walter Crist to contextualise the published board games of Aphrodisias within the wider context of graffiti boardgames in the Eastern Mediterranean in the 1st millennium CE (Crist, 2020, pp. 338-341, 343-344), arguing that gameboards were peripheral to the use of entertainment structures. However, Crist's study is reliant on Roueche's incomplete data. We shall return to the significance of these shortcomings later in the article.

More broadly, Angelos Chaniotis has emphasised gameboards place within the wider landscape of informal writing at Aphrodisias, which also includes pictorial and textual graffiti (Chaniotis, 2011; Chaniotis, 2015; for this approach see e.g. Chaniotis et al., 2024). Resultantly, more recent work has incorporated gameboards into systematic studies of particular buildings: Philip Stinson has collated graffiti gameboards in front of and within the Civil Basilica (Stinson, 2016, p. 128) and Ben Russell, Angelos Chaniotis, and Andrew Wilson have examined gameboards and associated graffiti in the Place of Palms (Russell et al., 2024; Chaniotis et al., 2024, pp. 140-148; Chaniotis, 2024; Wilson, 2019, pp. 205-208).

The precise number of gameboards at Aphrodisias is still being established, but the current total exceeds 640, making it perhaps the largest published record in the Mediterranean (Russell et al., 2024; Chaniotis et al., 2024, pp. 140-148; Chaniotis, 2024; Wilson, 2019, pp. 205-208). Key findings include 532 in the Place of Palms alone, and significant numbers in other sectors: the Theatre (92 boards), Hadrianic Baths (9 boards), Civil Basilica (7 boards), and the Temple of Aphrodite precinct (2 boards). Further boards are still to be recorded in the Tetrastoon, Theatre Baths, Sebasteion, and streets. This high count is partly due to the excellent preservation of marble and the prevalence of stone working (Russell et al., 2024, p. 118). Crucially, it reflects a society that valued public life, with games serving as a key means of social connection and daily interaction in the city's public spaces.

This past work has demonstrated that games and gaming was central to the social fabric of Aphrodisias, but no critical site-wide study of gaming culture at Aphrodisias has yet been presented—games have only been studied in some of the city's buildings or sectors, little detailed attention has been paid to the overall prevalence of different game types, the chronology of games, and attention to games in social space remains incomplete. At the time of writing a systematic gameboard survey is ongoing, and the intention of this article is to outline some of key insights which we can gain through re-analysing Aphrodisias' gameboards in context; future work will consider the distribution of gameboards across the whole city. The survey to date has focussed on gameboards in the theatre, to which we shall now turn.

The Theatre

The auditorium (*cavea*) was built into the eastern side of a prehistoric settlement hill (höyük) located in the centre of Aphrodisias in the Late Hellenistic Period (Photograph 1). The *cavea* faces east, towards Mt Salbakos (modern Babadağ). An inscription, carved in large letters on the Doric architrave of the stage and repeated on the second storey, states that Gaius Julius Zoilos, a freedman of Augustus, funded the stage building, the stage in front, and all its decorations (Roueché, 2007b, 8.5). A substantial collection of statues was found fallen onto the stage and

in the orchestra, including an Apollo, two Muses, portrait figures, and several Victories, all originally part of the stage building (de Chaisemartin & Theodorescu, 2017). In the 1st century CE, the auditorium was extended upwards with substructures and an extra tier of seating and completely re-fitted with marble seating; only the lower tier of seats now survives.

On the north side, the theatre's large ashlar retaining wall extended to a much lower level, forming part of the back wall of the south stoa in the neighbouring Place of Palms. A large, vaulted stairway ran through the retaining wall, providing direct access from the south stoa of the Place of Palms below to the *cavea* above. This staircase is probably contemporary with the construction of the Place of Palms in the Julio-Claudian period, though it could also have been added during the 1st-century renovations which saw an extension of the theatre (Wilson et al., 2024, p. 21). The tunnel was simply intended to provide access to theatre; it would have had the effect of uniting the two complexes into a more connected social space. The east side of the theatre was bounded by the Tetrastoon, a large porticoed courtyard, probably originally constructed in the early imperial period and the south side by the Theatre Baths, which have yet to receive systematic study—both complexes were probably renovated under Julian, as mentioned above. This central location means the theatre was situated in a highly central location in the middle of the city, and would have been subject to high foot traffic, for much of its history.

Figure 3

Drone Photo of the Theatre at Aphrodisias, Looking towards Northwest

Note. Photo by Ine Jacobs. © Aphrodisias Excavations.

In the 2nd century CE, the orchestra level was lowered perhaps to create a secure arena pit for gladiatorial and animal shows, underlining that this space was used for a variety of spectacles. Work by De Chaisemartin and Theodorescu has also identified several subsequent smaller ancient modifications and interventions, particularly on the stage building (de Chaisemartin & Theodorescu, 2017). We will return to these modifications later in this article. Later, in the 7th century, a massive wall made of reused materials was built along the back of the stage building, sealing off the entrances, and the bottom of the *cavea* was gradually filled in, whether through siltation or deliberate deposition of material (Ratté, 2001, pp. 139-140; p. 144; Jeffery, 2022, pp. 36-38).

Today, the Aphrodisias theatre retains all twenty-seven tiers of seating below the walkway and a few rows above it, along with much of the stage architecture. The preserved seating suggests the theatre originally had a capacity for around 7,000 people. A rich corpus of inscriptions and graffiti tell us about the life of the theatre (Roueché, 1993, pp. 31-38, 99-117. On the graffiti in the theatre see also Chaniotis, 2011; Chaniotis, 2015). It hosted a range of activities during its long life as a public building: various forms of drama would have been performed here, including mimes and pantomimes. Moreover, graffiti attest to gladiator shows, beast fights (*venationes*) and acrobatic displays taking place in Late Antiquity (Roueché, 1991, pp. 103-104. On late antique theatre use: Jacobs, 2019). Theatres were already in the Early Imperial Period used as places of political assembly (Roueché, 1991, pp. 102-103). The continuing political role of the theatre is attested by the subsequent addition of a monumental *loggia* or seat of honour, probably for a governor, as well as the presence of numerous graffiti referring to the Green and Blue circus factions, who by this time probably both played a role in the theatre organisation, and perhaps a political role in the life of the city (Roueché, 1991, pp. 99-102, 105-106). Alongside these graffiti, many gameboards were carved into the stone surfaces of the theatre, and it is to these gameboards that we now turn.

Gameboards in the Theatre

Overview and Spatial Distribution

In total, 92 gameboards were identified in the theatre; the following sections analyse the spatial distribution of these gameboards and a selection of the key game types. The spatial distribution of gameboards can cast light on how urban space was used (e.g. Trifilò, 2012; Talloen, 2018; Talloen, 2024; Schädler, 2024; Russell et al., 2024): they tell us about where the city dwellers spent sufficient time to play games, and they also tell us about where it was considered appropriate to play. Existing work demonstrates that the carving of gameboards into stone surfaces allowed for the creation of unofficial urban landscapes, which transformed the civic space into a social one where people came together in an informal setting, structured around playing, socialising and other accompanying activities, possibly including gambling. When undertaking spatial analysis of gameboards, it is important to consider that some gameboards on heavily worn surfaces were likely not identified. Moreover, Roueché suggests that some seats were subject to spoliation in the Middle Byzantine Period, which means that we probably only have a partial view of the original distribution of games and other graffiti, especially as some of these seats are likely to have been replaced—albeit not in their original locations—during modern conservation (Roueché, 1993, p. 99). Despite these caveats, spatial analysis of the gameboards within the theatre can still provide some useful insights into how this space was used in antiquity.

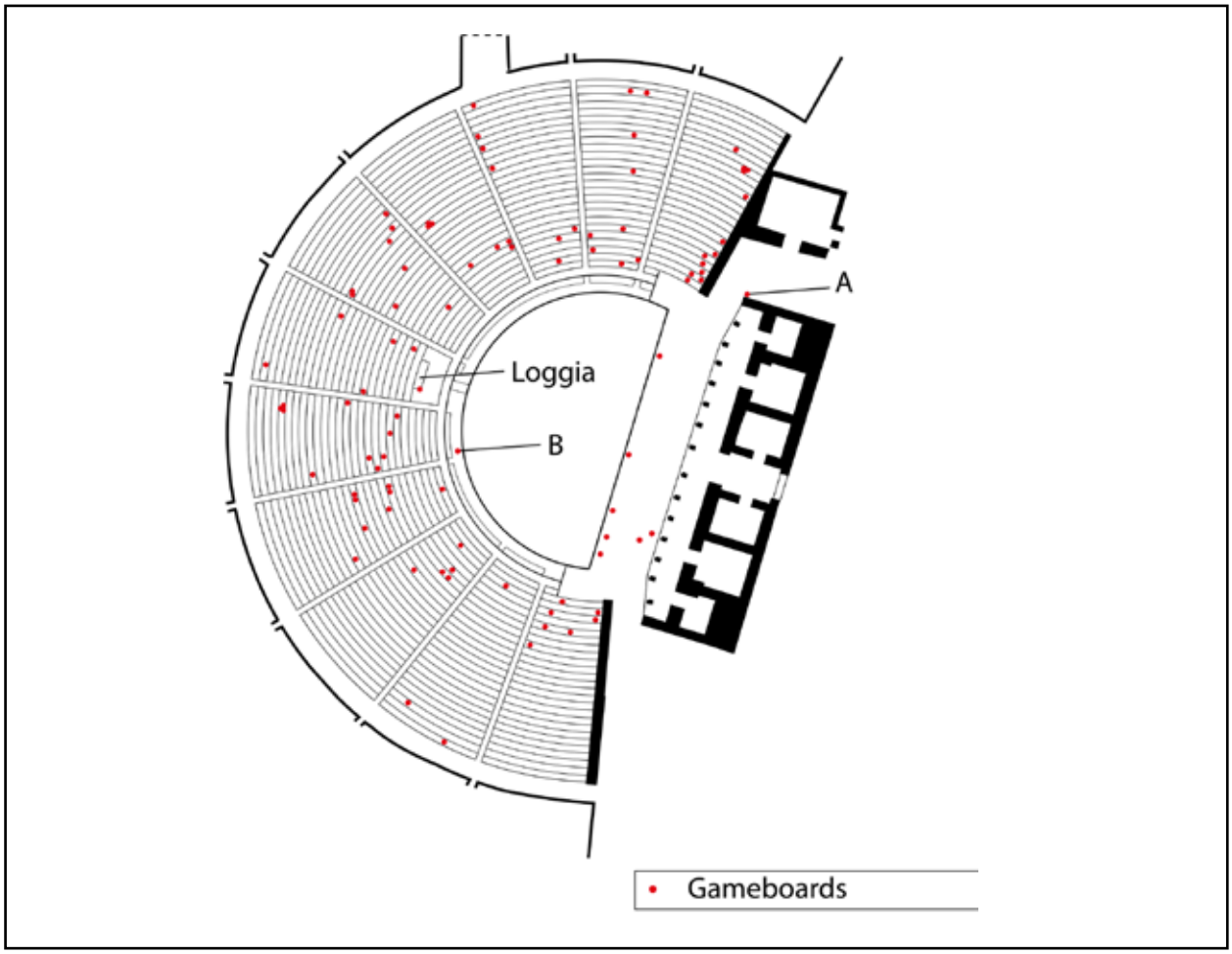
The re-survey of the theatre's gameboards (Figure 4) presented in this article, confirms earlier findings: most gameboards—83 in total—were in the *cavea*. While gameboards are generally common in the theatres of cities of the Eastern Mediterranean, most theatres, like those at Stratonikeia (Türkiye), Paphos (Cyprus), or Bosra (Syria), only host a handful of gameboards (Stratonikeia: Durnagölü & Söğüt, 2024, p. 400. Paphos: Richards, 2021. Bosra: Berger, 1999). These observations underline that theatres could play a role as places for informal social interaction such as gaming, but the large number of gameboards in the theatre at Aphrodisias make it an outlier, probably because in all of those cities, the theatres were peripheral to the urban space, whereas in Aphrodisias the well-

preserved theatre was, as we saw earlier, embedded within the city centre. The observations that follow in this article therefore are specifically intended to explore the spatial dynamics of gaming in the Aphrodisian context, without necessarily being fully generalisable to all Roman or late antique theatres.

In the theatre at Aphrodisias, the gameboards and related games were primarily concentrated in the peripheral seats of the northern and southern wedges, while fewer were found in the seats above and below the *loggia*. One notable exception is a cross-in-square on the *loggia* platform. One of the key findings of this survey is the presence of as many as seven gameboards on the stage. Moreover, a single gameboard comprising two rows of five squares (see further section on *pente grammai*/mancala) was located on the socle below the archive wall (Figure 7b). For the purposes of this article, we can thus say that games were clearly played in multiple locations within the Theatre. We will return to the significance of this distribution later. Now though, we shall examine five of the most informative types of gameboards and related gameboards identified in the Theatre and the games that would have been played on them.[1]

Figure 4

Plan of the Theatre with Approximate Locations of the Gameboards



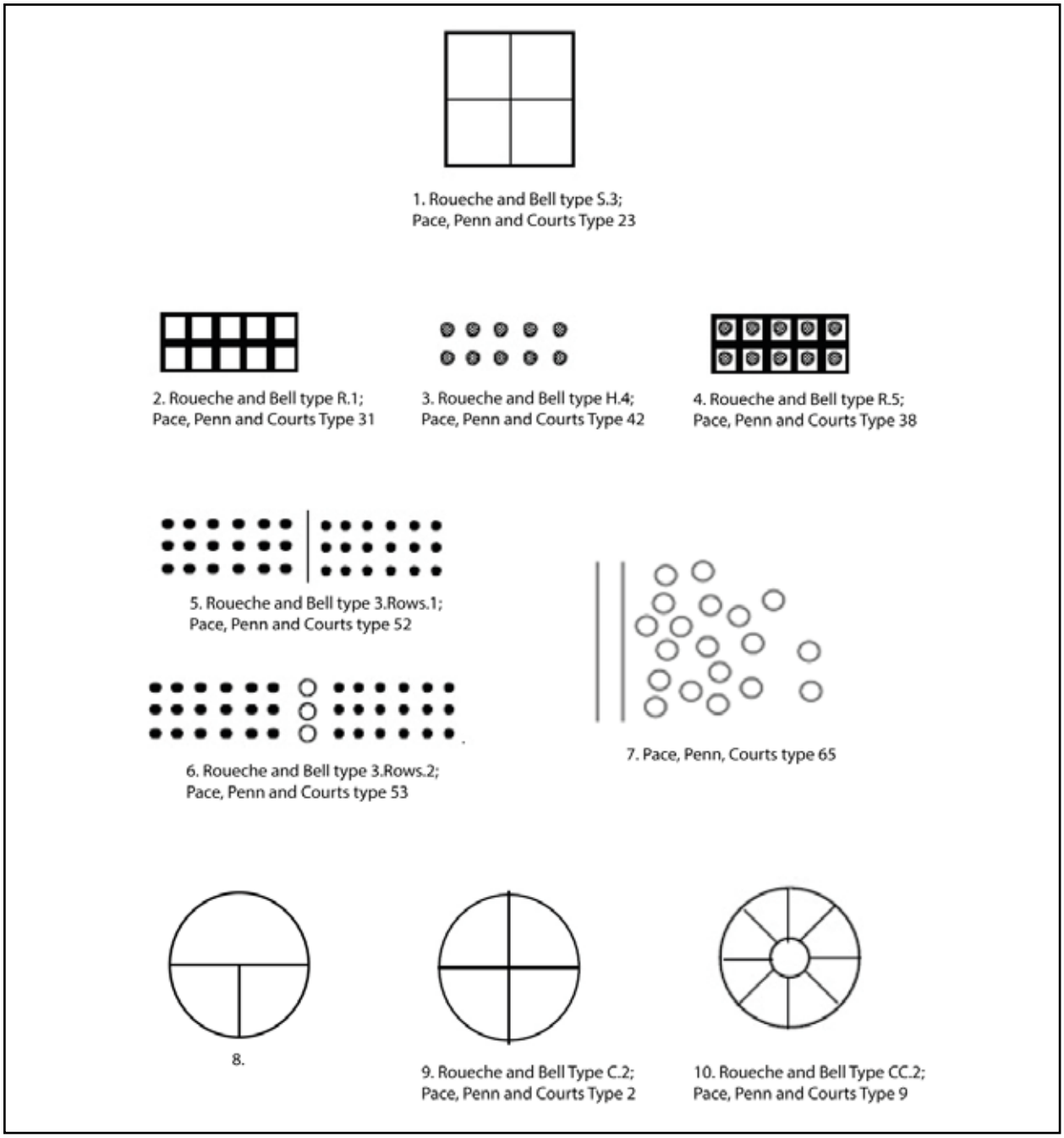
Note. Annotations by author, © Aphrodisias Excavations.

1 It is important to note that I do not discuss exhaustively all the gameboard types represented, and other types will be published, along with a more granular analysis of the spatial distribution, in the final study of the gameboards from Aphrodisias. Moreover, some of the markings cannot be securely connected with specific games but may still belong to the ludic sphere, hence their inclusion here.

A summary of the types of markings taken from Roueche and Bell's typology and discussed in this article can be seen in Figure 5. References are given to both floor marking typologies when discussing specific designs in the rest of this article. Some types of markings can be associated with known games (though as we will see there is some debate about specific board designs), while others may have served other purposes, unrelated to gaming, or may have been used for games now lost to us.

Figure 5

Overview of the Floor Marking Types Discussed in This Article



Note. Adapted from Roueche and Bell 2007 with additions from Pace, Penn and Courts 2024.

Three Men's Morris/terni lapilli

Perhaps the simplest type of gameboard found within the theatre come in the form of cross-in-square designs (Figure 5.1: Roueche and Bell type S.3; Pace, Penn and Courts Type 23) (Figure 6). In total, 13 examples were identified, including one notable example near the *loggia*. Some of these designs may have been Christian symbols, particularly those featuring a cross. However, it is generally accepted that when such designs appear on flat surfaces, some were likely used for playing a game now known as three-men's-morris (Penn et al., 2024, p. 15; Austin, 1935, p. 80; Parlett, 1999, pp. 116-119). The Augustan poet Ovid refers to a game called terni lapilli ("three pebbles"), which may be the same game (Tristia 2.481; Ars Amatoria 3.365–366), though we do not know the name which would have been used by the Greek-speaking inhabitants of Aphrodisias. Historically attested versions of these games are typically two-player strategy games where each player takes turns placing their three pieces on a 2 by 2 grid or cross in square; pieces are placed on the nine intersections where lines meet, aiming to form a straight row horizontally, vertically, or perhaps diagonally. In modern versions of three-men's-morris, when neither player achieves this after all pieces are placed, they take turns moving one piece to an adjacent empty space until a row is formed or a stalemate occurs. A similar game is still sometimes played in the Republic of Türkiye today, where it is called *üç taş,* or three stones (Durnagölü & Söğüt, 2024, pp. 387-8).

This is a simple game, but its simplicity is probably its strength—it is quick to play, and so many rounds can be played in a short time, while chatting. These characteristics make it well-suited for casual play in social settings. The game requires minimal equipment and offers just enough strategic depth to remain engaging without demanding intense concentration.

Figure 6

Selected Three-Men's-Morris Board(S)

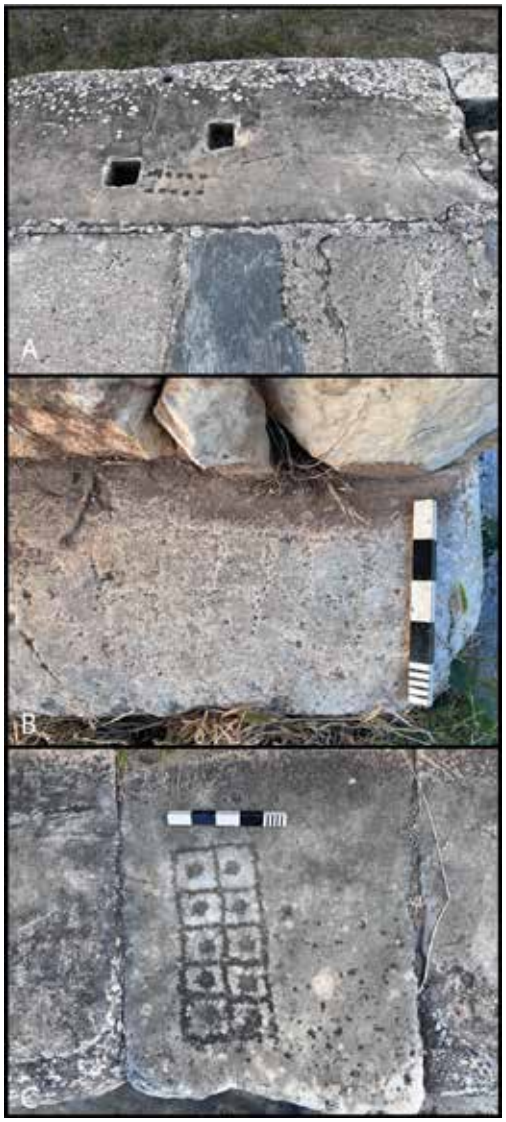
Note. (a) Cavea Block B, Row 1, Seat 3; (b) (possible) Cavea Block F, block below Loggia. (© Aphrodisias Excavations).

Pente Grammai/Mancala

Another common form of gameboard in the theatre consists of 2 x 5 rows of squares (Figure 5.2: Roueche and Bell type R.1; Pace, Penn and Courts Type 31, eight examples) or 2 x 5 circular holes (Figure 5.3: Roueche and Bell type H.4; Pace, Penn and Courts Type 42, 11 examples) (Figure 7). It is possible that these boards were used for the same game, given sometimes the designs appear juxtaposed, with the holes inside the squares (Figure 5.4: Roueche and Bell type R.5; Pace, Penn and Courts Type 38, represented by four examples). It is, however, less clear precisely which game was played on them, though two have been suggested: *pente grammai* (five lines) and mancala. While most of these designs were found in the *cavea*, two certain (comprised of rows of holes), and another possible example (an incomplete row of holes) of this family of gameboards were also present on the stage; as we have already seen that another (rows of squares) was located on the socle below the archive wall.

Figure 7

Selected Pente Grammai/Mancala Boards



Note. (a) south side of the stage; (b) block on socle of Archive Wall; (c) Cavea Block A, Row 6, Seat 3. (© Aphrodisias Excavations).

Pente grammai is a race game originating in the 7th century BCE and probably originally played on a board with five parallel lines, with spaces for counters at either end of each line (Kallipolitis, 1963, pp. 123-73). Each player aimed to move their pieces around the board according to the roll of a die, with the aim of getting their pieces into the 'sacred line', which was the line in the middle. The game is alluded to by Julius Pollux in his *Onomasticon* (9.97–8) in the 2nd century CE, which could suggest it was still played at the time Pollux was writing. This allusion has led to some scholars to interpret gameboards formed from two rows of five holes or squares as an evolution or survival of *pente grammai* into the Roman Period (Schädler, 1998). In one instance, a possible 'sacred line' on a board of this type in Izmir has been marked out with a leaf, perhaps a laurel, which is commonly used as a sign of victory (Schädler, 1998, p. 19). The hypothesis that these boards were used for *pente grammai* has not been universally accepted, however, because it relies on the evidence from just one gameboard. As a result, some experts suggest that there is insufficient evidence to accept this hypothesis, and have pondered whether these boards were used for playing other games (Crist, 2020, p. 336).

Gameboard designs falling into these families are therefore also interpreted as boards for playing mancala, in part because of familiarity with this game: it is still played widely in Türkiye, the Arabic-speaking world and Africa today (e.g. Durnagölü & Söğüt, 2024, pp. 388-389). To play this turn-based strategy game, players distribute seeds or stones from one pit to others in a cycle, aiming to capture the most pieces or reach a specific end condition (Russ, 2000). The core mechanics involve counting, strategic planning, and anticipating the opponent's moves.

The earliest archaeological evidence for mancala gameboards is from Matara, Eritrea, and date to the between the 6th and 8th centuries CE (Anfray, 1990). The game therefore existed at least by Late Antiquity, but it remains unclear when it spread into the Eastern Mediterranean region (Schädler, 1998). It is therefore unclear whether we should interpret the gameboards from the theatre at Aphrodisias as being used to play this game. These matters remain to be clarified, but in either case, both *pente grammai* and mancala are more complex than three-men's-morris, underlining that a variety of games were played in the theatre, supplementing its role as a venue for spectacle with one as a location for everyday social interaction.

Ludus Duodecim Scripta

A more complex game strategy is represented by the two roughly carved graffiti boards made up of three rows of 12 holes divided by lines or (semi)circles on seats in the theatre *cavea* (Figure 5.4-5: Roueche and Bell type 3.Rows.1/3.Rows.2; Pace, Penn and Courts types 52-53; e.g. Figure 8). Another, more elegantly carved gameboard laid out in a formal style on a recessed panel was also recovered from the theatre (Figure 9), though the lack of contextual information means we cannot be sure whether it was originally set up there (Roueché, 2004, p. 59). These gameboard designs can be securely linked to the game known in Latin sources as *ludus duodecim scripta* ("the game of the twelve lines"), also known as *alea,* and by late antiquity as *tabula* or *tabli/tavli* (τάβλι, see Schädler, 1999). This game is probably an indirect ancestor of modern backgammon/tavla, which is widely played in the Republic of Türkiye today. It was a race game in which two players competed using fifteen pieces each, moving according to the roll of two or three six-sided dice. To win the game, a player needed to move all their pieces from the starting position to the endpoint, following a set path. As in modern backgammon, it is likely that players could land on and capture an opponent's single piece, sending it back to the start, a feature which would add tension to a game. A space occupied by two or more pieces of the same player was safe from capture. The game required a combination of luck—the role of the dice—strategy and tactical blocking to win. The complexity means that this game is probably more involved and took longer to play than the other games which we have already met above. At the same time, relatively few gameboards of this type have been identified in the Theatre, and this may imply that the strategic complexity of this game did not appeal to all occupants of ancient Aphrodisias.

Figure 8

Duodecim Scripta Board, Cavea Block B, Row 2, Seat 1

Note. © Aphrodisias Excavations

Figure 9

Four Joining Fragments of a White Marble Formally Laid Out Board for Playing Ludus Duodecim Scripta

Note. © Aphrodisias Excavations.

This game is well attested in textual sources, and its strategic nature probably related to its widespread popularity. It was played even by emperors: in Late Antiquity, the emperor Zeno was a keen player (Agathias Scholasticus, *Palatine Anthology,* ix.482) This game is common elsewhere in Aphrodisias. Monumental, formally inscribed versions on reused statue bases are known from the Hadrianic Baths (Roueché, 2004, nos, 68, 69, 70, 238), and more roughly cut graffiti versions are known in the Hadrianic Baths (Roueché, 2007b, 5.1), Civil Basilica (De Staebler, 2008, pp. 287-288; Stinson, 2016), Place of Palms (Russell et al., 2024, p. 120, fig. 14; p. 122, fig. 17), the Stadium, and the House of Kybele neighbourhood.[2] It is also well known elsewhere in Anatolia (e.g. Sagalassos: Talloen, 2018, p. 103, fig. 2; pp. 111-114, figs. 4-7. Xanthos, Letoon, and Perge; Talloen, 2024, pp. 95-96; Ephesus: Schädler, 2024, p. 133, fig. 5. Kibyra: Demirer, 2015. Laodikeia: Şimşek, 2013, pp. 121-122, res. 145. Tripolis: Duman & Baysal, 2017, p. 543, with p. 557, fig. 6) and around the Mediterranean (Ferrua, 2001). Many of these examples from other sites in Anatolia are formally inscribed gameboards, like the one shown in Figure 9.

These formally inscribed gameboards are clearly distinct from the graffiti gameboards which were carved into the floors, pavements and other surfaces—their quality suggests they were done professionally, and we know from epigraphic evidence that some of the examples from the Hadrianic Baths were set up by an administrative official (the πατὴρ τῆς πόλεως, father of the city), suggesting a degree of official sanction for gaming, despite Justinianic laws prohibiting gambling for money especially among the clergy (*Codex Justinianus* 1.4.34.1; 3.3.43; *Novel* 123.10). We do not know who was responsible for setting up the formally inscribed gameboard found in the theatre, or indeed whether it was originally set up there, but the presence of monumental gameboards in some public spaces in the city indicates that public gaming activities were endorsed by elites in the city.

As Talloen (2018, s. 99-100) has observed, the presence of graffiti boards and formally inscribed boards in the same spaces suggest very different social relationships and makers, but we might also go further and suggest that the presence of formally-inscribed boards might help to explain why so many graffiti gameboards were carved into surviving seats and pavements in the theatre at Aphrodisias—the presence of some 'official' gameboards in this public building, or in other public spaces across the city suggests that some kinds of gaming were officially tolerated. Indeed, the graffiti gameboards for playing *duodecim scripta* replicate the form of professionally carved gameboards for the same game. This may suggest that the 'official' gameboards were either insufficient to meet the gaming needs at Aphrodisias, or that some gamers either were not socially permitted to access formally inscribed boards or preferred to play on graffiti boards, perhaps evens ones that they carved themselves. However, since these formally inscribed gameboards relate only to *duodecim scripta,* but not the other types of games attested in the theatre or elsewhere in Aphrodisias, it is also clear that elite provision of games did not meet all the needs of the city's gamers.

Marbles Lanes

A less common form of marking is the single poorly-preserved board made up of at least nine irregularly hemispherical depressions or pockets (Figure 10). The board was in on a seat in Block A, Row 5 of the *cavea*. This design is not common at Aphrodisias, but at other sites can be linked to a type of gaming surface known by modern scholars as 'marble lanes.' The most recent study of these gameboards showed that these are common in cities in both the eastern and western Mediterranean, particularly cities on or near the Mediterranean littoral (Penn et al., 2023). The placement of the depressions which make up these gameboards are extremely irregular and are sometimes accompanied by a double parallel line. Because they are so irregular, these gameboards are only loosely classifiable: the single example from the theatre at Aphrodisias probably corresponds to the type recently referred to as 'clustered' marbles lanes (Pace et al., type 65; Penn et al. 2023, p. 122, Type 2; Figure 5.7). These are characterised by a dense cluster of pockets without any clear organisational scheme.

2 The author is preparing a study of the sectors without citations here.

Figure 10

Marble Lane, Cavea Block A, Row 5, Seat 3

Note. © Aphrodisias Excavations

We know little about how these gameboards were used for play, but the association between marbles lanes and graffiti which refer to games at Rome and Cherchel demonstrates a connection with gaming. Given the diversity of designs, it is possible these playing surfaces were used for several distinct yet related games. Two sarcophagi from Rome which show groups of children playing a game which involved rolling small spherical objects down an angled board could suggest that these gameboards were used for rolling or throwing games;[3] it is possible that the double line reflects either the starting point for the spherical objects or the target for the ball to be rolled into. Two Latin authors may also refer to marbles-type games. The early imperial historian Suetonius (Augustus, 83.1) may have listed this type of game (which he terms 'ocellatis') among the games played by Augustus in his old age, and in the final years of the 4th century CE Augustine of Hippo (Confessions, 1.9.5) referred to playing 'pilula', a diminutive of 'pila' (ball), which could be a reference to the same game. It is worth noting that the small groups which might have been involved in this game or family of games would have meant that a lot of space was needed to play. This game is probably primarily a game of skill, and particularly of physical dexterity, which sets it apart from the other games identified in the Theatre.

3 Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines, Cp 6467; Ma 99; Vatican, Museo Chiaramonti, Inv. 662, see Penn et al., 2023, pp. 117-119 with further references.

Circle Designs[4]

Not all floor markings at Roman and late antique sites can or should be connected to games. The interpretation of a group of motifs featuring circles with varying numbers of 'rays' or 'spokes' (ranging from three to twelve or more), along with details like concentric circles or lateral lines, has been the subject of much debate. At least 20 variants are known at Aphrodisias. In the Theatre, the most common representatives of this broad family include three circles with three spokes (Figure 5.8; not included in previous typologies),[5] 26 circles with four spokes (Figure 5.9: Roueche and Bell Type C.2; Pace, Penn and Courts Type 2; Figure 11a), and a single circle with eight spokes arrayed around a very small concentric circle (Figure 5.10: Roueche and Bell Type CC.2; Pace, Penn and Courts Type 9) (Figure 11b). Two circles with four spokes were found on the stage. Four circles without spokes or interior designs may attest to the incomplete carving of these floor marking.

Figure 11

Selected Circles Designs: (a); With Four Spokes, Cavea Block A, Row 19, Seat 4; (b) With Eight Spokes and a Concentric Circle, with Other Associated Pictorial Graffiti, Cavea Block D, Row 15, Seat 8

Note. Photo by author. © Aphrodisias Excavations.

4 The author and a colleague are preparing a study of circles with eight spokes at present.

5 This type is not accounted for in existing typologies; it is probably a monogram, see below.

At other sites around the Mediterranean, these "wheel" designs have frequently been described as gameboards for playing three-men's-morris, which we met earlier.[6] However, more recently, scholars such as Ulrich Schädler and others have observed that this game would have been quickly won by whoever took the first turn and placed their piece in the centre of the circle, allowing them to effectively control the board (Behling, 2013; Heimann & Schädler 2014; Schädler, 2018). This has led to the suggestion that some of these boards could be used for a game, known today as *franc à carreau*, in which players must throw or toss objects into a specific quadrant in order to win (Schädler, 2018). However, this would only be practical when such floor markings were large enough to facilitate such a game—and may be discounted by the small diameter (11 cm) of some examples, as well as the relatively small amount of space between the spokes on examples with more than four spokes. It is important to emphasise at this point that we do not have a perfect knowledge of all games which were played in the past and it is possible that some of these circles with spokes were used for games which are now lost.

However, other scholars have suggested that that these designs should not be interpreted as gameboards at all. For example, Roueché has viewed them as topos markers, designed to indicate either meeting places or the places where participants in public events might stand (Roueché, 2007a, especially p. 100 and fig. 12.3). This interpretation may be supported at some other sites by associated graffiti mentioning personal names—one from the Temple of Hera at Samos has "ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ ΜΑΓΡΟΥ" ("of Johannes the Butcher") inscribed within the circle itself (Schädler, 2018, p. 90). Moreover, on the Tetrapylon Street at Aphrodisias, another circle with four spokes (Type C.4) is situated near to a graffito figure who appears to be pointing at it, which Roueche has taken as an indication that this marking was a place marker (Roueché, 2007b, 1.401; Roueché, 2007a, p. 103, no. 9). Circles with three spokes, like the one in the proedria pavement in the theatre (Figure 12), could be weathered or unfished, but they might also be read as a simple monogram which resolves as ὁ τ(όπος) (i.e. 'the place'), though we have no further information about what this place may have been for. However, in most cases it is unclear how appropriate it is to interpret circular markings at the Theatre in Aphrodisias as place markers, given that here seats seem to have been reserved by seat inscriptions and processions are unlikely to have taken place in the steeply banked *cavea* (for seat inscriptions see e.g. Roueché, 2004, p. 212).

Figure 12

Circle design with three spokes on pavement of cavea proedria

Note. Photo by author. © Aphrodisias Excavations

6 This interpretation was first proposed in Blümlein, 1918, pp. 101-2; this interpretation is commonly followed in publications which mention gameboards but which are not primarily concerned with them.

Alternatively, we might consider Christian connotations. Circles with four spokes (or crosses) could be used for the *franc à carreau* game mentioned earlier, but they could also clearly have a Christian connotation, in reference to the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. More complex designs could also have Christian meanings. For example, Ine Jacobs previously suggested that circles with eight spokes could be read as Greek monograms resolved as ἰχθύς (Ἰησοῦς Χρῑστός Θεοῦ Υἱός Σωτήρ — Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour, see Jacobs 2013, p. 619). Related arguments have also recently been raised by Nihal Durnagölu ̈and Bilal Söğüt, based on their work at Stratonikeia (Durnagölü & Söğüt 2024, pp. 391-392). These scholars suggest that while simpler circle-and-spoke designs may sometimes be used for games, more elaborate versions—especially those featuring intricate elements such as semicircles at the points where the spokes meet the circle's edge—might instead be Christian symbols, similar to those found in Stratonikeia's mosaic pavements (Durnagölü & Söğüt 2024, p. 393, fig. 6, p. 394, fig. 8). The presence of these markings in sanctuaries, most notably at the Temple of Apollo at Didyma, has led other scholars to speculate that they could have been used for divination (Höckmann 1996, pp. 259-261; Widura 2015, pp. 73-75; Schädler 2018, pp. 92-94). These designs are therefore hard to relate to games in all instances; this ambiguity highlights the challenges of identifying games in the archaeological record, and even if markings cannot always be interpreted as games, they are nevertheless important because they help us understand the multifunctionality of urban spaces in antiquity.

Dating the Gameboards

The gameboards in the *cavea* cannot be closely dated—the date of the theatre's construction in the late 1st century BCE provides an extremely broad *terminus post quem* (de Chaisemartin & Theodorescu, 2017, p. 30). It is possible the seating of the theatre underwent several periods of maintenance or improvement during the structure's long life. However, these possible renovations have yet not been investigated in detail and so we do not fully understand the phasing of the *cavea*. The *loggia* was probably added later, given that it disrupts the overall seating arrangement, but this remains to be confirmed (Roueché, 1991, pp. 99-101): Roueché posits a date between the mid 3rd to 5th century CE, and one plausible moment would be during the Julianic renovations to this part of the city, mentioned above, but these is currently no evidence for this. As a result, all we can say is that the gameboards carved into this part of the theatre were done after the Hellenistic Period and probably before the stage building collapsed and the bottom of the *cavea* was slowly in during the 7th century (de Chaisemartin & Theodorescu, 2017, p. 47; Ratté, 2001, p. 144; Roueché, 1991, p. 107). However, both Roueché and Chaniotis have suggested that much of the surviving textual and pictorial graffiti found in the theatre *cavea*, and in Aphrodisias in general, should be dated the Late Antique Period, particularly the 4th-5th centuries (Roueché, 1993, pp. 119-120; Chaniotis, 2011; Chaniotis, 2015, p. 198). It may be that a similar date is appropriate for the gameboards, especially given that many are still clearly visible and little worn, which suggests they relate to the later phases of the theatre's use.

In contrast with the *cavea*, it is possible that the stage building as it is currently preserved is at least partly a late antique addition or renovation, though chronology remains to be clarified in detail. De Chaisemartin and Theodorescu's analysis of the stage building underlines that modern repairs to the stage surface make it hard to understand the phasing of this part of the theatre, but suggest that at least some parts of the stage can be dated to the middle of the 2nd century CE (de Chaisemartin & Theodorescu, 2017, p. 46). However, a poorly preserved verse inscription on the theatre stage refers to "benefaction" ([εὐ]εργεσίης) by a man named Androcles (Roueché, 2004, p. 34). Roueché has posited that this might belong to a 4th-century CE repair phase (Roueché, 1991, p. 99; Roueché, 2004, III.40). In light of this, it is worth noting that the current surface is made partly of dark grey Aphrodisian marble, which was more commonly used in pavements within the city after the 4th century (Wilson et al., 2024, pp. 67-8). Moreover, several elements of possible reused stone are also visible in the current stage building, most notably a probable grey-marble statue base with foot cuttings still preserved on the south end of the stage; the presence of reused materials may indicate late antique additions or repairs. Finally, De Chaisemartin and Theodorescu briefly mention changes to the stage buildings in the form of walling up of the intercolumnia in the stage building, and

though these changes cannot be closely dated, the proposed dating of the 3rd century could be pushed later—these modifications could have happened later in Late Antiquity (de Chaisemartin & Theodorescu, 2017, p. 46; Roueché, 1991, pp. 104-105, fig. 2).

Whether or not the stage building was renovated in Late Antiquity, there can be no doubt that it remained in use until at least the 7th century CE, when as we have seen, the stage buildings collapsed and the bottom of the *cavea* either slowly began to silt up or was intentionally filled to counter inundations. Taken together, the structural, formal and informal epigraphic evidence indicate that this building had a very long life, and that this remained an important social space well into Late Antiquity. If we accept that the stage surface was continuously used, then it naturally follows that some or all the games and associated graffiti found on the stage must also date to the Late Antique Period—or afterwards. This supports the picture which emerges from other parts Aphrodisias, principally the Place of Palms, which appears to have hosted social activities, including gaming, between the 4th and the 6th centuries CE (Russell et al., 2024, pp. 117-118).[7] More broadly, this chronology fits with Lavan's (2020, pp. 241-22) hypothesis that there a general upswing in the carving of graffiti, including gameboards, in cities during late antiquity.

Discussion and Conclusions

The gameboards in the theatre at Aphrodisias provide a discrete dataset which allow us to think about how this space was used in Late Antiquity. As noted by comparison to other published materials, the range of games from the theatre is broadly like the games that are played elsewhere in the site—they consist of games both of chance and of skill, and they reflect a rich gaming culture in Aphrodisias. Future work, after a sitewide survey is completed, will consider the prevalence of different game types across Aphrodisias. The dating of the gameboards in the theatre is methodologically challenging, but it is likely that some of them were carved, and then used, in Late Antiquity. Intriguingly, at this stage we can say that several of the games attested in the theatre and elsewhere in the city are related to games which are still played in Türkiye: terni lapilli (similar to *üç taş*); *ludus duodecim scripta* (similar to backgammon/tavla) and possibly mancala. This continuity through time underlines the deep history of gaming as a key social activity in Anatolia.

Crist previously suggested that a relative absence of games around the *loggia* in the centre of the *cavea* can be explained by spectators sitting in this area did not want to be seen playing games by the governor or other dignitaries during performances in an arena that hosted events meant to boost the city's prestige (Crist, 2020, p. 340). This hypothesis speaks to a sense of social control of how the theatre was used and the activities it was appropriate to undertake in it, whether officially (because one did not want to be seen playing by the governor or other senior official), unofficially (because it was considered inappropriate to be seen playing games in the presence of the governor, by the wider community) or because space around the governor was in high demand and there was no room to play games. This interpretation implies that gameboards reflect how the theatre was used on busy days in which the structure hosted spectacles, but in doing so it does not take account of the broader spatial context of the theatre building and deserves to be re-evaluated.

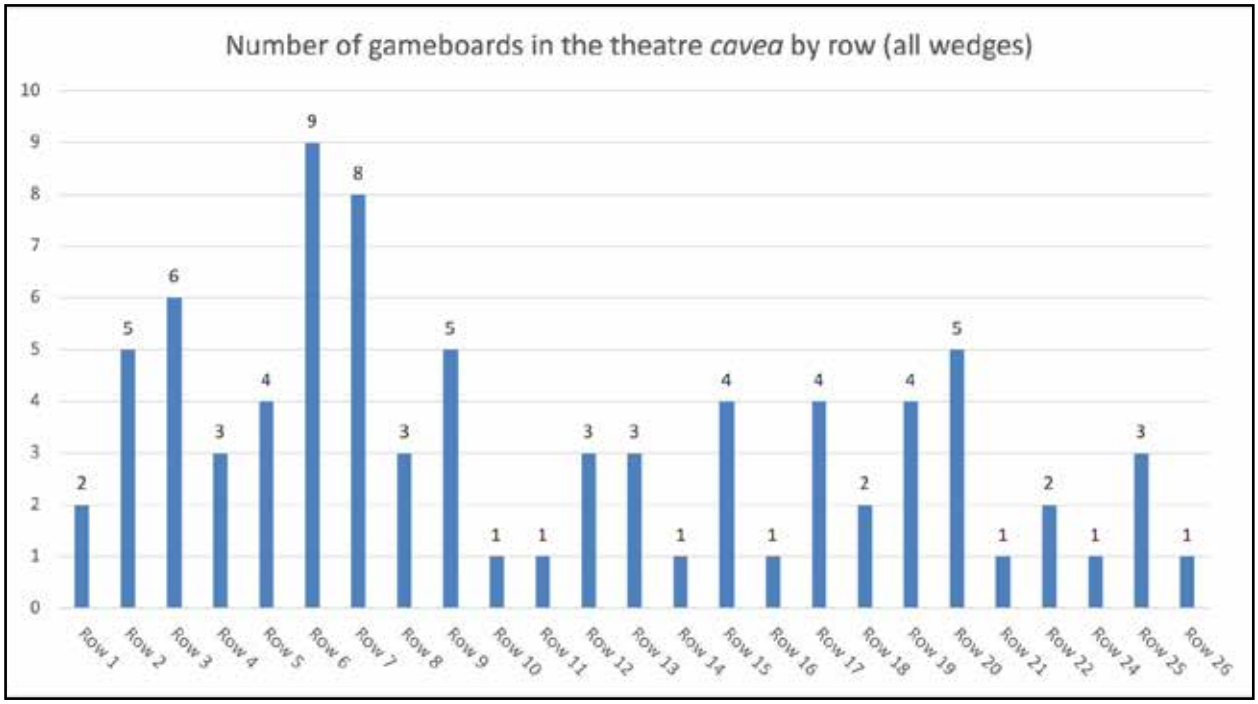
We might question whether it was practical to play games while spectacles were taking place. Even if the Late Antique population of Aphrodisias was not large enough to fill all seats, playing on a gameboard carved into a seat would render it unusable. This is particularly true for larger boards, like those for *ludus duodecim scripta* or the marbles lane, which could remove at least one seat from use and may have required players to stand to throw or roll pieces. More than half these gameboards are situated on lower rows in the *cavea*, relatively close to the stage, among some of the most desirable seating, though others are preserved higher up (see Figure 4; Figure 13): 20 gameboards (24% of those in the *cavea*) are located in the bottom five rows, which would have been directly visible to the occupants of the loggia and 46 gameboards (or 56%) were in the first ten rows from the bottom, and would

7 It cannot be excluded that some of the gameboards, mostly of types not discussed herein were also carved later in the site's history, after antiquity; this possibility will be explored in a subsequent contribution.

therefore have been highly visible to individuals entering or passing through the theatre from the Place of Palms or the Tetrastoon.

Figure 13

Number of Gameboards in the Theatre Cavea by Row (All Seating Blocks)



The theatre was an open, public space, accessible even when events were not taking place. Evidence from the stage, such as graffiti and gameboards, indicates that parts of the theatre were used for leisure activities outside spectacles. For example, the depiction of a tightrope walker (Roueché, 2007b, 8.12c) clearly references theatre events but could not have been made during a spectacle. Similarly, gameboards on the stage could only have been used at other times. In this context, it is reasonable to suggest that the *cavea* gameboards were also intended for use when the theatre was otherwise empty. The absence of carvings near the *loggia* may reflect social taboos or respect for the office of the governor. Visibility while playing may have been desirable, but it was likely aimed at other members of the urban community rather than elites; as Trifilò (2012) has suggested in relation to Rome, some individuals may have played in public to be seen. In Aphrodisias, their audience was probably fellow townspeople who visited the theatre during "off-peak" times rather than governors or other social elites.

Here, we should return to the wider context of the theatre building. The east-facing *cavea* was screened from the sun by the stage buildings, which would have provided shade during the early morning, as the surviving first-story stage buildings still do today. Later in the day, the theatre would have received shade from the theatre hill into which it was cut; in August 2024, even though only the lower tier of seating survives, most of the cavea was routinely covered in shade by c. 530 pm. This effect would have been accentuated in the past when the *cavea* would have been higher, meaning that shade arrived in the lower parts of the theatre earlier in the day. While the implications this holds for individual gameboards remains to be clarified by solar modelling in future, we can say now that parts of the cavea would have been covered in shade during the early morning and in the evening: only in the middle of the day would it have been exposed to direct sunlight and heat—and even then, awnings might have provided further shade. Consequently, the theatre was not only for watching spectacles but also could also be used as a place to spend time, meet, and socialise at other times. As already noted above, many of the games were found on the lower rows

of seats, which would have received shade for the greatest amount of time and would also have been easier to access because they would have required less climbing. This suggests in some instances that these games were used by people entering the theatre from the bottom and using for space for the shade that it provides.

The correlation between shade and gameboards has already been noted elsewhere in the city, particularly in the urban park known as the Place of Palms which lies at the heart of Aphrodisias: it has recently been shown by Russell et al. that the distribution of many gameboards located on the pavements of the porticos and on the seats around monumental pool correlated closely with the most well-shaded parts of this urban space (Russell et al., 2024, pp. 111-114). The theatre, which we have already seen was connected with the Place of Palms by a tunnel, should be viewed as an extension of this culture of play in well-shaded, central parts of the city, though we should not assume that the people who played in the theatre were exactly the same people who played in the Place of Palms: it is possible that each space had its own, partially overlapping communities of play (on communities of play see: Huizinga, 1938[1949], 12).

Playing games on the gameboards carved into the seats of the theatre need not have been the primary reason for which people congregated in the theatre, but the presence of so many gameboards in this space may nevertheless provide evidence that it was a popular place to meet, because of its central place within the urban landscape and its easy connection with other public spaces such as the tetrastoon to the east or (via a tunnel) the Place of Palms to the north. This connectivity, combined with the shade provided in the morning and in the evening by the architecture of the stage building and the steep höyök into which the theatre was cut would have made the theatre an attractive place to spend time and engage in social activities such as gaming. In some cases, these gaming activities, particularly when concerned with games of chance, were likely to have been accompanied by gambling (Purcell, 1995), but as we have seen, some of the associated floor markings, such as the circle designs, may also have been used for other activities, such as divination. These ancillary activities underline the value of the theatre as a location for creating shared social experiences in a very public setting.

In this broader context, the gameboards in the theatre at Aphrodisias provide a different view on the way that this space might have been used in the Roman and Late Antique Periods. The theatre clearly hosted spectacles of various kinds over its long history—including gladiators, *venationes,* and acrobatic displays (Roueché, 1991, pp. 103-106). Moreover, the theatre at Aphrodisias, like others across Asia Minor, functioned not only as a venue for spectacles but as a civic showpiece and occasional political assembly space, reflecting cities' competition for prestige through festivals and public display. As formal public assemblages became less common in late antiquity the role of the theatre at Aphrodisias probably shifted toward hosting representations of imperial authority, embodied in the *loggia*, and maintained a blurred boundary between formal political and entertainment gatherings, even as traditional civic assemblies declined (Roueché, 1991, pp. 102-3).

But when it was not being used for such shows, the theatre was also an informal social space that was frequented by the city's occupants. Here, the gameboards offer a tangible link to the informal rhythms of daily life in Aphrodisias. While the theatre was designed for spectacle and for civic display, its architecture also made it an inviting place for more casual social interactions. This material also reflects a wider late-antique trend in which ordinary people adapted monumental spaces to their own purposes, often by carving graffiti such as gameboards, suggesting broader conceptions surrounding how urban space could be used and reshaped to create new social utility among the subaltern classes whose perspectives we often to grasp through the textual records (Trifilò, 2012; Talloen, 2018; Talloen, 2024; Schädler, 2024; Russell et al., 2024). The presence of carved gameboards suggests that even when the grand performances had ended, the theatre continued to draw people in—not as spectators, but as participants in a different kind of shared experience. Whether waiting for an event to begin, lingering after one had finished, or simply passing the time in the shade, those who gathered here were engaging with the space in ways that extended beyond its monumental function.

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