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Of *linga* Stones and Gaming Boards

An article by the late J. E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw in *South Asian Archaeology* 1981 on the oldest known chessman from Sri Lanka¹ and her cogent survey of the chesspieces known from historical India has induced me to reconsider the "gamesmen" from the Indus Valley Civilization.

With many stringent problems still unsolved and a fair number of the fragments of the jigsaw puzzle still missing, it is not surprising to find that little interest has been shown in topics such as the one under review by those engaged in Indus Valley Culture studies. However, it may be held that a study of the small finds can be particularly instructive for a better estimation of daily life in this culture.

It is generally agreed that the large numbers of small pawn-shaped objects originating from such urban centres of the Indus Civilization as Harappa, Moenjo-daro and Lothal² and made of terracotta, ivory, shell, marble, stone, steatite, agate, lapis lazuli and faience, were used in games of which we have no record (Fig. 1-8). Although basically of similar shape, they show a considerable disparity in detail, varying from naturalistic renderings of the male organ to a more abstract form of this and also including plainly domed or even triangular shaped pieces. All of these "gamesmen" are well shaped and carefully finished. Circumcised notching, incised line patterns and separately added tops occasionally occur. White banded agate used for realistically rendered phallic representations

¹ J. E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, "A unique piece of ivory carving - the oldest known chessman", *South Asian Archaeology* 1981, B. Allchin, ed., Cambridge, 1984, pp. 245-249.

² Sir J. Marshall, *Mohenjo-daro and the Indus Civilization*, London, 1931, vol. III pls. CXXX 28, CLIII 19-33, CLV 11-25; E. J. H. Mackay, *Further Excavations at Mohenjo-daro*, Delhi, 1938, vol. II, pls. CXXXV 8, CXXXVII 1-13, CXXXIX 6-10, 15-19, 21, CXL 1-15, CXLII 53-62, 72; M. S. Vats, *Excavations at Harappā*, Calcutta, 1940, vol. II, pl. CXVII 14-15, 18-46; E. J. H. Mackay, *Chanhudaro Excavations 1935-36*, New Haven, 1943, pl. LX 9-15, 17-20; S. R. Rao, *Lothal and the Indus Civilization*, London, 1973, pl. XXXIV A third row left.

is, in a few instances, imitated as horizontal bands of red paint on a white paste or as a white infill on a terracotta background. Quite singular, although encountered at both Moenjo-daro and Lothal³, is a type of "gamesman" shaped like a tower with concave sides and a tiny square attached to the flat top.

The presence of a limited number of dice made of limestone, steatite and pottery coming from Moenjo-daro as well as Harappa appears to underline the supposition that the Harappans, like the Sumerians and the Egyptians, were familiar with a sophisticated system of games. Although these may well have had magico-religious value, there is presently no reliable indication to sustain this notion, which, therefore, cannot be pursued.

In his booklets on Moenjo-daro and Harappa⁴, F. A. Khan illustrated two battered and broken heavy limestone fragments which show on their upper surface an incised pattern of irregularly and carelessly drawn rectangulars (Figs. 6-8). Judging from the haphazard array of "gamesmen" placed in some of these incised configurations Khan apparently regarded these stone fragments as parts of gaming-boards. At the risk of stressing the obvious, one should point out that the well-known gaming-board from the Royal Cemetery at Ur in ancient Mesopotamia clearly demonstrates the importance attached to playing games in Sumerian society. Although a similar situation may well obtain for the Indus Civilization and, in fact, there appears little doubt that this was the case, more evidence is needed before so designating these two broken stone fragments. In view of the fact that the latter represent mere fragments of presumably much larger slabs, their weight would render them too heavy and clumsy for portable game-boards. It seems equally debatable to consider them as permanently fixed or positioned, either indoors or out. A more functional use as part of a floor or pavement with an incised pattern would appear more likely than not and more in accordance with the architectural findings at Moenjo-daro.

It is a matter for consideration that the floors or pavements to which these two fragments originally belonged themselves served as a kind of gaming-board, since it stands to reason that to a large extent games were played on the floors of houses, outside in the street, or even simply out in the open as is still common daily practice in many parts of Asia.

The remarkable resemblance between these pawn-like pieces and those

⁴ F. A. Khan, *The Glory that was Harappa*, Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan, Karachi, n.d., p. 33; Id., *The Glory that was Mohenjodaro*, Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan, Karachi, n.d., p. 18.

used in modern chess has led to their premature identification as “gamesmen”. One singular feature, however, has never been taken into account. A considerable number of these Indus objects have a small, almost ‘pin-prick’-like hole in their flat base and because some have also a tiny hole in their top, this would indeed underline their representing a phallus, but would not afford further proof that they were ever used as “gamesmen”. It would certainly be difficult to visualize a gaming-board, fitted with small spiky pins for holding these “gamesmen” after each move in the game. Such a consideration would not only exclude the making of comparisons with playing methods known from the ancient East, but also with those still to be observed to this day in many parts of the Middle East and Asia, where the ground outdoors, the street or the floor indoors more often than not serves as the gaming-board. The holes in the base of the Indus Valley “gamesmen” would not only be a confining factor with respect to the nature of the gaming-board itself, but would also, undoubtedly, lend the game a positively slow and rather static character which would be in sharp contrast to the alertness, swiftness and speed which characterize most games of this part of the world.

Mention should briefly be made to the fact that the shallow holes previously referred to do not show wearmarks one would expect from frequent handling. This may be another point against their use in games.

S. R. Rao⁵ is duly cautious in assigning a cult value to every object which bears a resemblance to a phallus. On the other hand, he readily accepts for the Harappan Civilization three different kinds of game. In addition to a game involving the use of dice and chess, another game is described by Rao – “A third game known to the Indus people involved the use of a wooden board with a number of pits, a terracotta model of which was found at Mohenjo-daro. Apparently seeds of tamarind or small stone pebbles were used in the game, as is even now prevalent in Indian villages”⁶. Rao considers the brick from Moenjo-daro with incised squares (Fig. 8) to be a model of the gaming-boards used for the game of dice and refers to the fact that the excavations at Lothal have also yielded two models of which “one made of pottery and the other a brick tablet”⁷. The ‘chess pieces’ from Lothal have been described as follows: “The gamesmen from Lothal are made of terracotta, chank-shell, bone, ivory and stone. The castle-shaped gaming pieces might have originally represented the ‘King’ and his ‘minister’, while thick squattish castles with a disc top and base resemble the ‘elephant’ of a modern

⁵ Rao, 1973, p. 136.

⁶ Rao, 1973, p. 113.

⁷ Rao, 1973, p. 112.

chess set. A tall conical object with a button-head may stand for 'chariot', and the small tetrahedrons with or without a blind hole for foot-soldiers" ⁸.

For Early Dynastic IIIB, Akkadian and Ur III times (c. 2550–2000 B.C.) a limited number of these phallus-like "gamesmen" have been found outside the geographical limits of the Indus Civilization: that is, in southern Mesopotamia in the Royal Cemetery at Ur, in northern Mesopotamia at Tepe Gawra VI and Tall Brak Level IV and in northern Iran at Tepe Hissar IIIB ⁹. This geographical distribution can be augmented by the occurrence of one other specimen made of lapis lazuli which was found in a foundation pit of the Third Barbar Temple at Bahrain ¹⁰.

It may be that one should be prepared to reassess a previous view ¹¹; that these "gaming pieces" served albeit not primarily, as amulets and that reference was made to the fact that even today in India amulets in the shape of a *līṅga* are carried by the followers of Śiva.

Although it should be stressed that the chronological discrepancy between the prehistoric Indus Valley material and that from historical or contemporary India or Pakistan does not militate against an acceptance of an underlying mutual abstract idea – in each case with identical or at least comparable religious, mythological or metaphysical-philosophical connotations – a shape or representation or a pattern may show a similar material expression and yet need in each cultural environment a different 'translation'. To consider the Indus Valley "gamesmen" as conscious renderings of a phallus does not imply, quite apart from their functional use in Harappan times, that the Indus people should be regarded as worshippers of an early or proto form of Śiva. In fact, there need not be any relation between the Indus Valley *līṅga* and Śivaism of the later periods. Needless to say, this would seem to apply to all Indus Valley expressions of intellectual behaviour as well as material from historical India with a non-secular, philosophical character.

Recently, B. and F. R. Allchin have accepted the presence of *līṅga* stones in the Indus Civilization: "Moreover, stones identical in form to the *lingam*, the phallic emblem of Śiva, were found in the cities" ¹². Doris Srinivasan ¹³ and G. F. Dales ¹⁴ on the other hand refute the identification

⁸ Rao, 1973, p. 113.

⁹ Rao, 1973, fig. 40 – Chart I.

¹⁰ P. V. Glob, "Templer ved Barbar", *Kuml* 1954, p. 152 (English version).

¹¹ E. C. L. During Caspers, *Archaeological Evidence for Maritime Trade in the Persian Gulf in the Third Millennium B. C.*, Ph. D. thesis, London University, 1969, p. 246.

¹² B. & F. R. Allchin, *The Rise of Civilization in India and Pakistan*, Cambridge World Archaeology, Cambridge etc., 1982, p. 214.

¹³ D. Srinivasan, "Unhinging Śiva from the Indus Civilization", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1984, No. 1, pp. 77–89.

¹⁴ G. F. Dales, "Sex and Stone at Mohenjo-daro", *Frontiers of the Indus*

of phallic symbols in the Indus material. Moreover, Dales is quite categorical about this: "Where then is the evidence to support published statements such as 'Phallic worship was an important element of Harappan religion' (Basham 1954: 24)? With the single exception of the unidentified photography of a realistic phallic object in Marshall's report (pl. XIII, 3), there is no archaeological evidence to support claims of special sexually-oriented aspects of Harappan religion" ¹⁵.

Putting aside the suggestion of the interchangeability of the Indus Valley *liṅga* and the phallic emblem of Śiva of later times which in our view cannot be corroborated, these larger stone *liṅgas* (Figs. 10-15) and the phallus-shaped "gamesmen" share a peculiar detail that can only be satisfactorily explained as being a securing device. The larger stone phallus icons occasionally have two holes in their flat and polished base, while the "gamesmen" previously discussed may have one small blind hole in their flat underside. This fastening device may be matched in a polished porphyry(?) base or support (Figs. 16-17) decorated with a cut trefoil pattern ¹⁶ and showing two holes in the cylindrical and shallow depression in its top and two others drilled in the flat, polished base. It is a matter of great significance that this support decorated with trefoil designs covering its entire surface may well have carried a cylindrical object, such as, for instance, a *liṅga*, which may have been fitted in the shallow cup on the top by means of two wooden or metal pegs or rods, whilst the base too was secured onto another flat surface by two pegs or thin rods fixed inside the two holes in its flat base.

In the light of the foregoing it would appear feasible to consider a similar situation pertaining to those "gamesmen", which were more than likely intended to be regarded as a representation of the male organ. It would not be difficult to visualize these 2.5-5 cms high "gamesmen" as miniature *liṅgas*, which fixed to a separate base or surface by means of their small pinprick-like hole, were the centre of private worship in much the same way as miniature phallic emblems of Śiva are fixed on a small pin and worshipped as a private house cult in India today.

In 1883 Major Forlong remarked that all Eastern literature is full of references to the pipal tree or *Ficus religiosa*, the female species being called *Ficus indica*. He also mentioned that "The symbolic trefoil or

Civilization, Sir Mortimer Wheeler Commemoration Volume, B. B. Lal, S. P. Gupta, eds., New Delhi, 1984, pp. 109-115.

¹⁵ Dales, 1984, p. 115.

¹⁶ Mackay, 1938, vol. II, pls. CIV 26, CVII 35; B. & F. R. Allchin, 1982, p. 214, fig. 8.18; E. C. L. During Caspers, *The Religion of the Indus Civilization*, in: Th. P. van Baaren, L. Leertouwer & E. Bunning, eds., *Iconography of Religions* (forthcoming).

fleur de lys with its seed springing from its stems, is still used as a Phallic ornament, and the leaf, especially of the Bo, is very like the old form of Ph: it has a long attenuated point, and is ever quivering on the stillest days. The tree has many peculiarities, not only in its leaves and modes of leafing, but in its fruit and modes of multiplying, which could not fail to make it of a very holy and important character in the pious, poetical and imaginative mind of the East”¹⁷. To treat the trefoil as a phallic ornament in stead of an astral as is normally done, a design so frequently employed in the Harappan Civilization as a cut pattern on the cloak of the so-called Priest King¹⁸, on the polished stone support previously described and on steatite beads, as well as a painted decoration on for instance clay beads of an apparently cheaper type, will have fundamental consequences. If the pipal tree had a phallic connotation, the Harappans may well have practised a phallic tree worship, a fact, which could, indeed, be corroborated by the iconography of the seals¹⁹.

Returning to the “gamesmen” it suffices to say that it will always remain impossible to segregate accurately the large numbers of indistinctly shaped “gamesmen” into proper miniature phallus emblems and those which were indeed meant to be gaming-pieces. Rao may well be correct in regarding the tetrahedrons as gamesmen, be it not necessarily chessmen.

Amongst the collections of the Moenjo-daro material in Karachi, Moenjo-daro and New Delhi²⁰ are a number of terracotta objects which by dint of their shape can be recognized as playing-boards comparable to those still used today in both India and Pakistan. Since these playing-boards from Moenjo-daro must have had a primarily non-religious character, their modern counterparts can be regarded as a heirloom handed down from the past, much in the same way as the shape of the present-day bullock cart of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent has its roots in the terracotta cart models of Harappan times.

The terracotta objects under discussion (Figs. 18–20) fall into two categories, although both shapes can be, undoubtedly, grouped together. The one group, the larger of the two, represents a spiral pattern gouged out of a flattish roundel of clay measuring approximately 12–13 cms in

¹⁷ J. Forlong (Major-General), *Rivers of Life, or Sources and Streams of the Faiths of Man in all Lands*, London, 1983, vol. 1.

¹⁸ For a recent discussion see E. C. L. During Caspers, “The ‘Priest King’ from Moenjo-daro: An Iconographic Assessment”, *AION*, 45, 1985, pp. 19–24.

¹⁹ Rao, 1973, p. 136; E. C. L. During Caspers, “Harappan Temples: Fact or Fallacy?” (forthcoming).

²⁰ Marshall, 1931, vol. III, pl. CXXXIII 7–8; Mackay, 1938, vol. II, pls. CV 45, CVI 45, CIX 1–2; Vats, 1940, vol. II, pl. CXX 27.

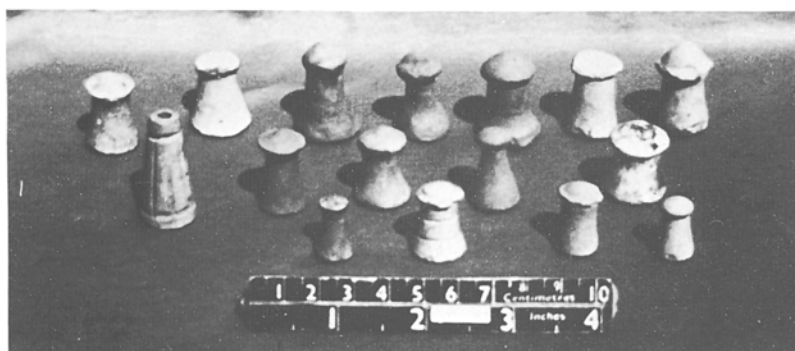


Fig. 1 - "Gamesmen" from Moenjo-daro and Harappa. Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

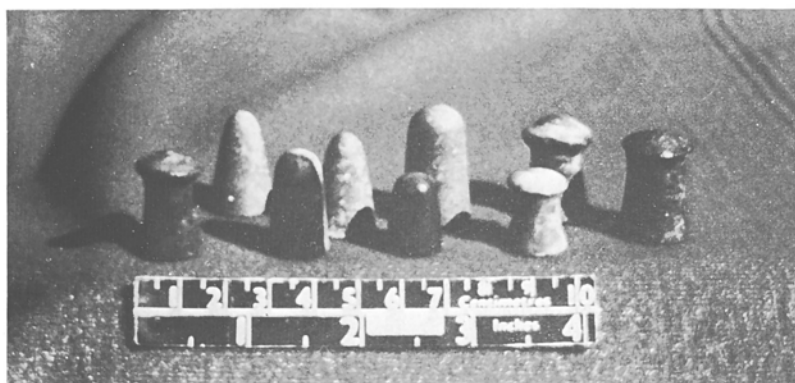


Fig. 2 - "Gamesmen" from Moenjo-daro and Harappa. Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

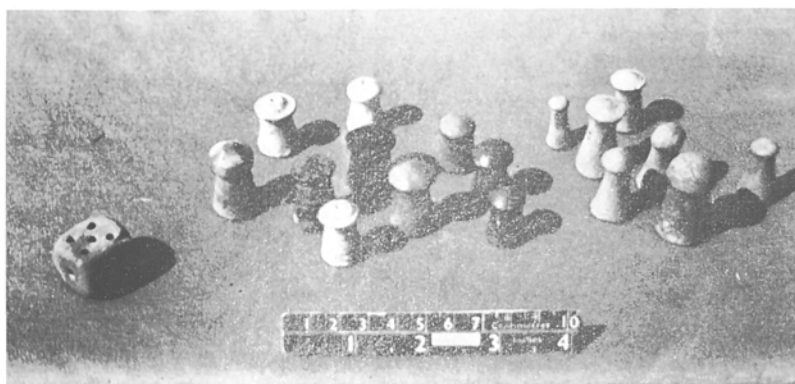


Fig. 3 - "Gamesmen" and dice from Moenjo-daro and Harappa. Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

Fig. 4 – “Gamesmen” and dice from Moenjo-daro and Harappa.
Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

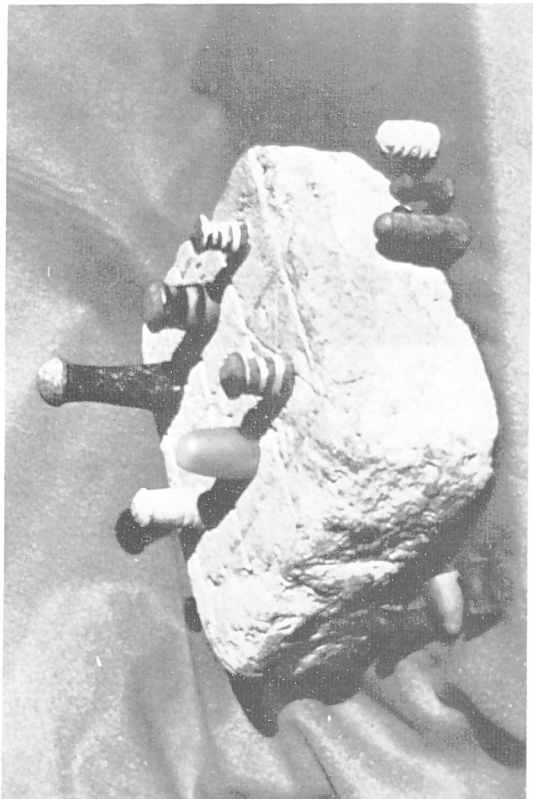
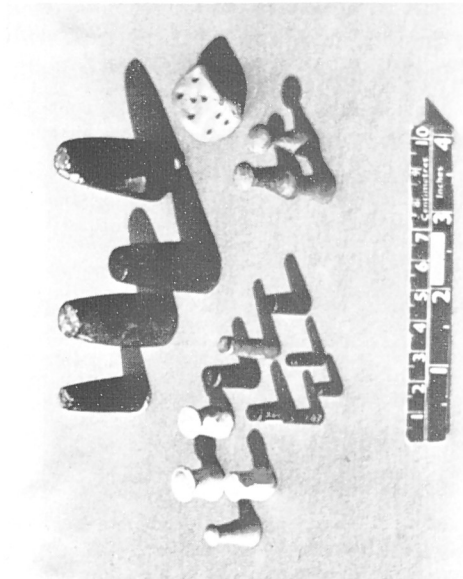


Fig. 6 – Gaming-board and “gamesmen” from Moenjo-daro.
Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

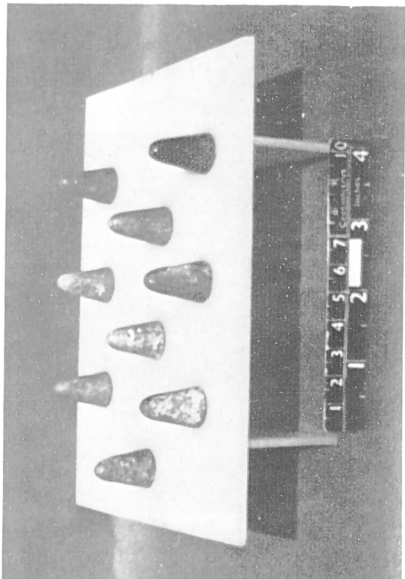


Fig. 5 – “Gamesmen” from Harappa.
Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

Fig. 7 – Gaming-board and “gamesmen” from Moenjo-daro. Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

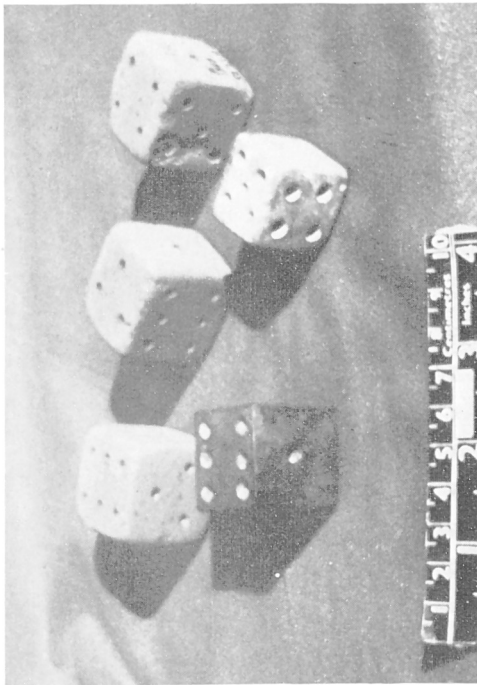
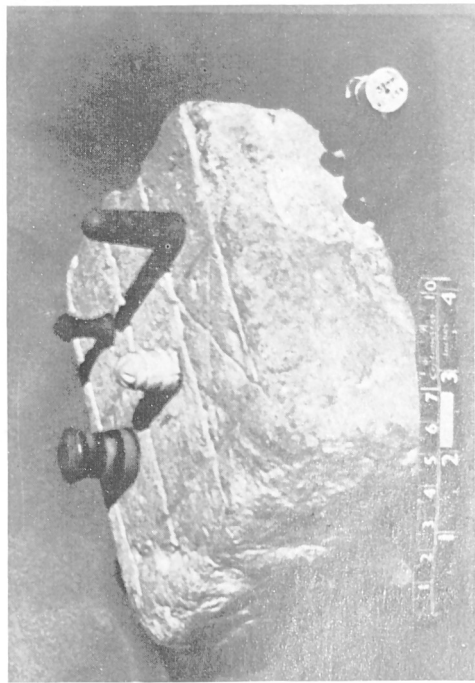


Fig. 9 – A group of dice from Moenjo-daro. Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

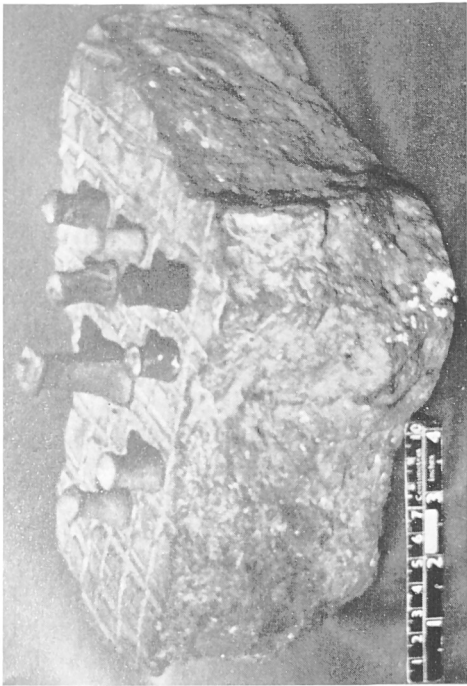


Fig. 8 – Gaming-board and “gamesmen” from Harappa. Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

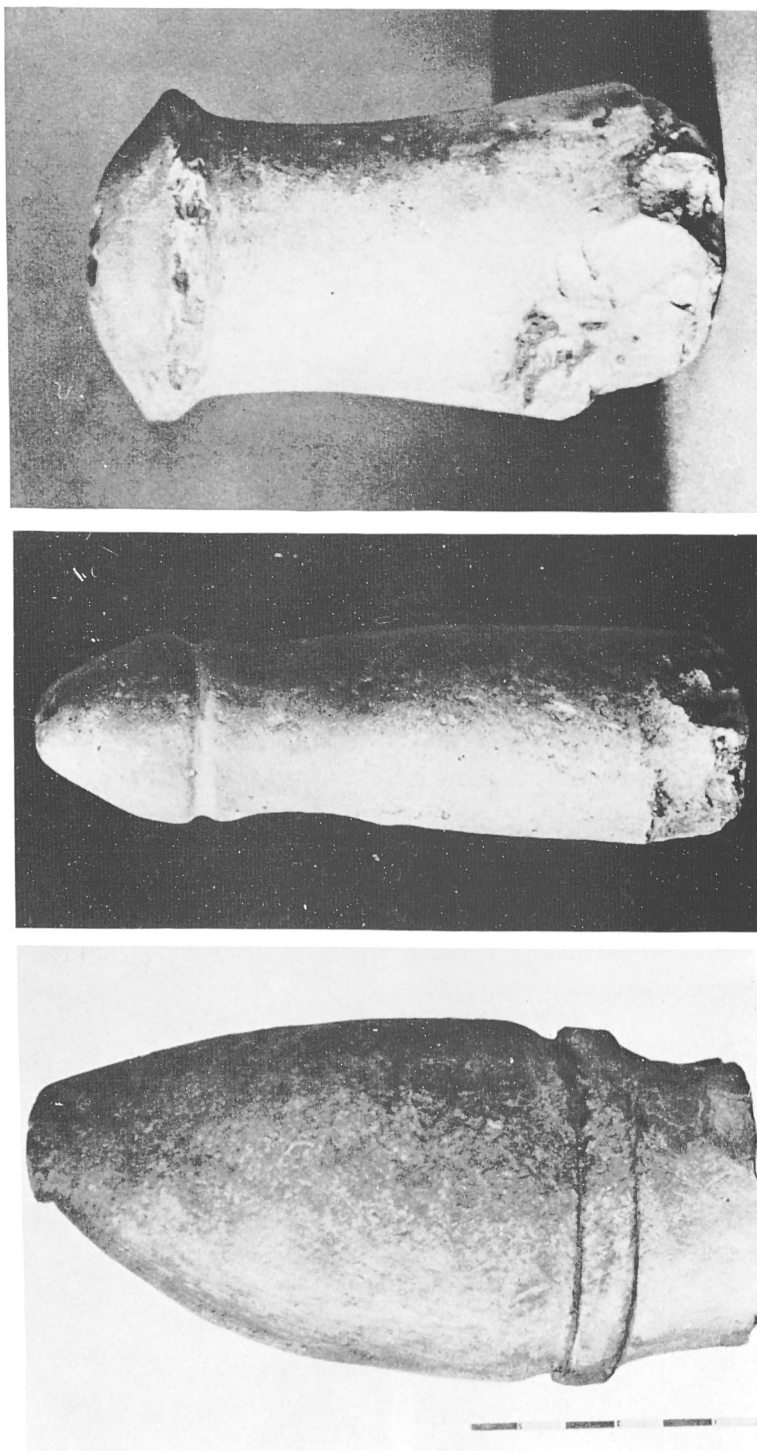
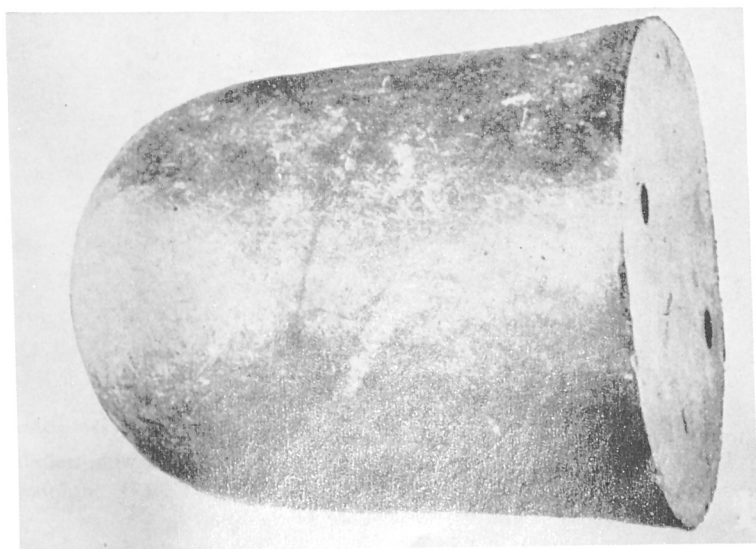
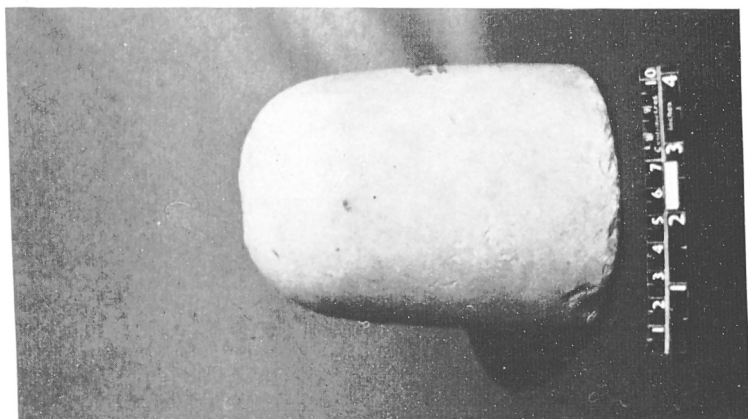


Fig. 10-12 - Phallic stones from Moenjo-daro and Harrappa. Marshall, 1931, I, Pl. XIV, 2,4,5. Moloney, of Pakistan.



Figs. 13-15 - Phallic stones from Moenjo-daro and Harappa. Left Marshall, 1931, I, Pl. XIV, 4; Mackay, 1938, II, Pl. CIV, 29; middle and right Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

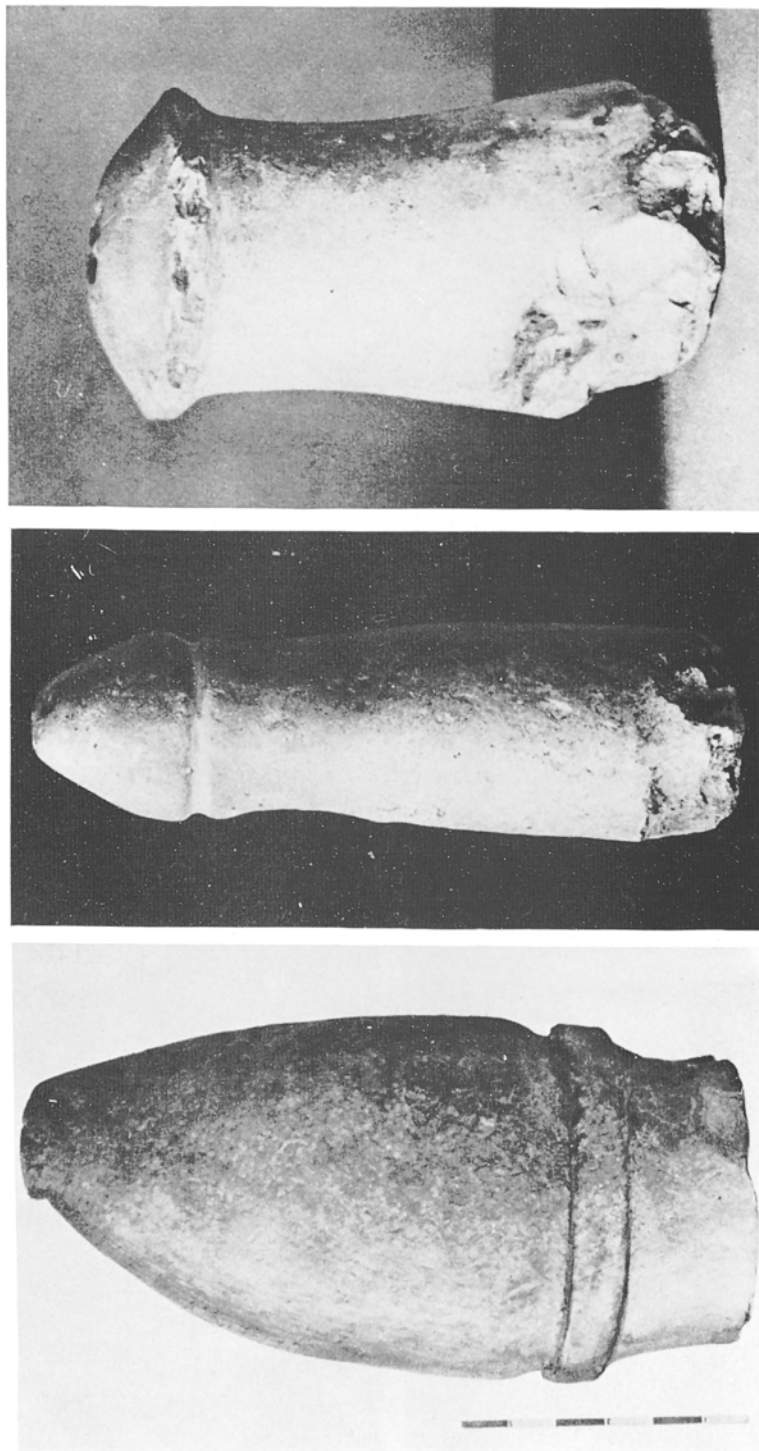
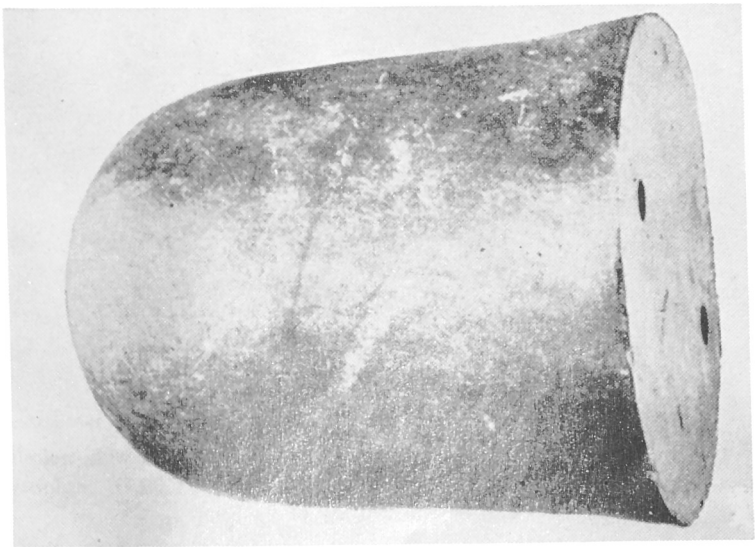
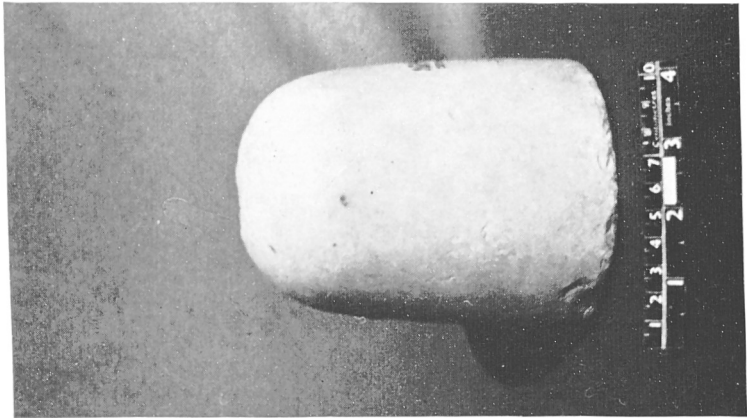
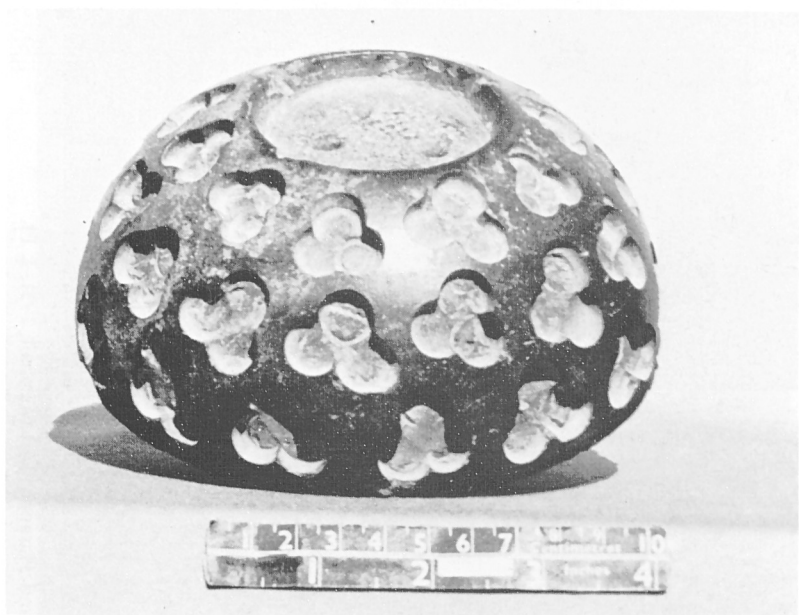


Fig. 10-12 - Phallic stones from Moenjo-daro and Harrappa. Marshall, 1931, I, Pl. XIV, 2,4,5. Moloney, of Pakistan.



Figs. 13-15 - Phallic stones from Moenjo-daro and Harappa. Left Marshall, 1931, I, Pl. XIV, 4; Mackay, 1938, II, Pl. CIV, 29; middle and right Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.



Figs. 16-17 – Stone support or base from Moenjo-daro decorated with trefoils. Two holes in recessed top and in polished, flat base. Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

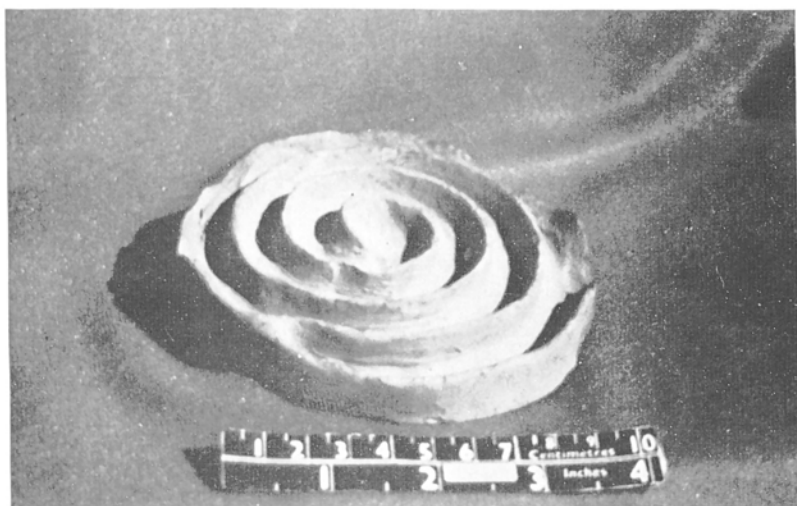


Fig. 18 - Pottery gaming-board from Moenjo-daro. Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney.
Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

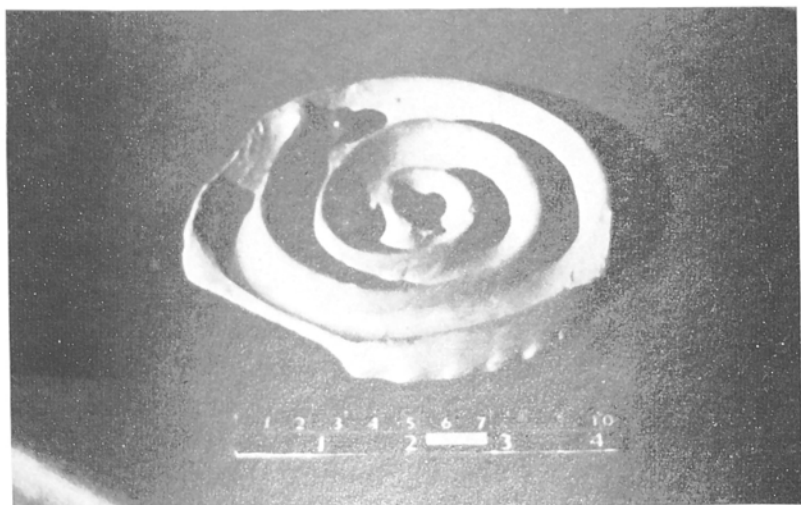


Fig. 19 - Pottery gaming-board from Moenjo-daro. Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney.
Courtèsy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

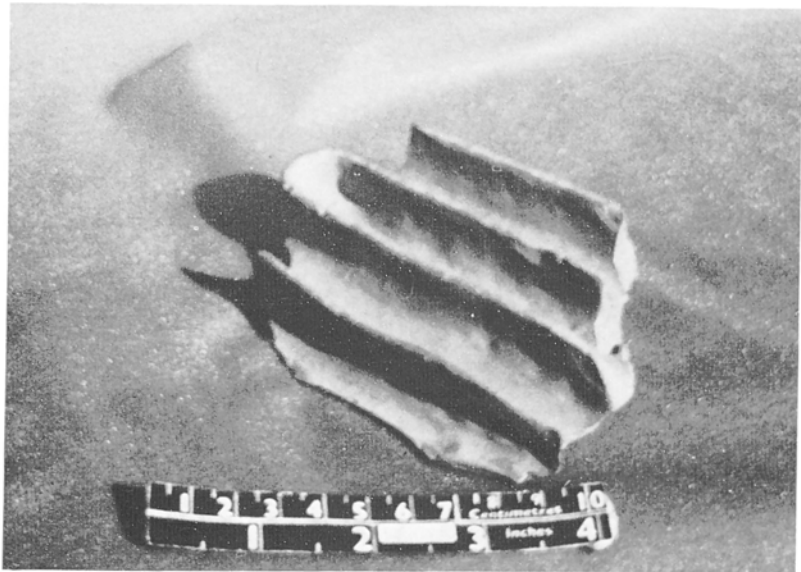


Fig. 20 – Fragment of a pottery gaming-board from Moenjo-daro.
Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

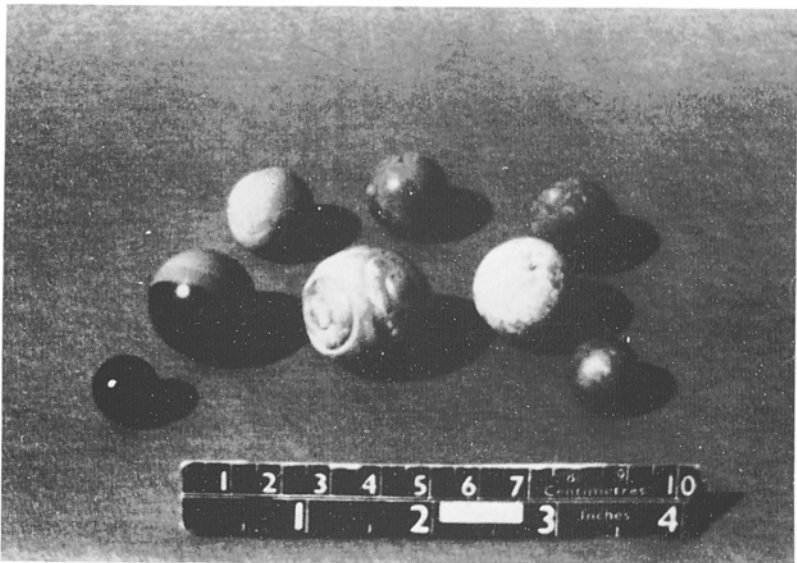


Fig. 21 – Marble and pottery balls from Moenjo-daro. Photo J.C.M.H.Moloney.
Courtesy, Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

diameter. It can be seen from the available pieces that the number of turns is variable. The second category which, most likely, is smaller, consists of an oblong piece of clay of comparable thickness grooved with a flowing up-and-down pattern. The total length cannot be ascertained in the available specimens, but it may not have exceeded 12–15 cms.

Today's playing methods in northern India show a spiral-shaped game drawn in outline on the ground which can be interlocked by several intersections, the total number of which can vary, while the other game played on the oblong gaming-board from Moenjo-daro can be matched in today's snake and ladder game²¹.

Again by modern analogy it appears plausible that these two Harappan games also involved dice. This is a convincing hypothesis since several dice have been found in the excavations at Moenjo-daro, Harappa and Lothal²². Unlike the modern dice, the ones from the Indus Valley mark 1 opposite 6, 2 opposite 5 and 3 opposite 4, making the sum of opposite numbers equal to seven (Figs. 3, 4, 9). Today goat droppings or seeds are used in games; it could be convincingly suggested that a similar practice pertained to the past. In addition, some of the small marbles (Fig. 21) of various materials now exhibited in the museums of Pakistan and India may well have served in corresponding fashion. Larger marbles, some with a delicate, cut pattern, could have been used for larger gaming-boards or in those cases where, analogous to today's practice, the outlines and inner configurations of the playing-boards were drawn on the ground.

Last to be considered is a pattern of multiple concentric squares depicted on a small number of faience stamp seals from Moenjo-daro and Harappa²³ which one could conceivably interpret as representing a square gaming-board. The credibility of this suggestion lies in the presence of a square alabaster seal with a pierced cylindrical knob on the back from an Akkadian stratum at Tell Asmar, in the Diyala region of central Mesopotamia²⁴. The face of this stamp seal shows multiple concentric

²¹ I owe the information on the modern games in India and Pakistan to Miss Zaidi, former research assistant at the National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi and to Dr. M. Gautam, Institute Kern, University of Leiden, Netherlands.

²² Marshall, 1931, vol. III, pl. CLIII 7–10; Mackay, 1938, vol. II, pls. CXL 19–20, CXLII 84–86; Vats, 1940, vol. II, pl. CXX 46–48, 51–54, Rao, 1973, pl. XXXIII C.

²³ Marshall, 1931, vol. III, pl. CXIV 516–518; Vats, 1940, vol. II, pl. XCV 383, 395.

²⁴ H. Frankfort, *Tell Asmar, Khafaje and Khorsabad* (Oriental Institute Communications, No. 16), Chicago, 1933, fig. 32, third row. Square stamp seals with a pierced cylindrical knob on the back, this equally non-Mesopotamian in shape, but with a Sumerian representation on the face, come from Tell Asmar and from Ur (Frankfort, 1933, fig. 27, As. 31–221); Sir C. L. Woolley, *Ur Excavations*, vol. II: *The Royal Cemetery*,

squares and a bead pattern between the outermost squares which, in this case, must be seen as marbles used in this game and belonging to this gaming-board. This seal is non-Mesopotamian and it was found together with the well-known cylinder seal depicting an elephant, a rhinoceros and a gharial in the Indus Valley tradition, as well as other Indian imports. A similar square stamp seal made of terracotta depicting multiple concentric squares, each intersected by closely set, transverse strokes, but without a bead pattern, was found in northern Mesopotamia at Tepe Gawra layer VI²⁵ which extends into the Akkadian period. It does not need further emphasis that despite the multiplicity of squares, this pattern closely resembles that which is shown on the terracotta game-board from Lothal²⁶.

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to discuss whether the Mesopotamian examples are of Indian workmanship or made locally for a Harappan resident in Sumer. Neither would it be possible to deal with the significance of this small group of stamp seals from Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, nor, indeed, with this playing-board design in particular. These matters will, therefore, receive attention elsewhere.

London, 1934, pl. XLII, U.18928; L., Legrain, *Ur Excavations*, vol. X: *Seal Cylinders* London, 1951, pl. 37, no. 6333.

²⁵ E. A. Speiser, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, Vol. I: *Levels I-VIII*, Philadelphia, 1935, pp. 163-164, pl. XXXVII, no.2a.

²⁶ Rao, 1973, pl. XXXIII D.