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## Sex and Dice: Approaching Girls with Games in Ancient Greece and Rome

*This paper describes how dice, knucklebones and board games could have romantic or sexual implications among ancient Greeks and Romans. It analyzes a series of literary sources taken from Greek and Latin literatures, and a few archaeological findings. Some of those pieces of literature are fictional and tell invented stories, but grounded on realistic facts, while others report real historical events related to famous figures, or to anonymous people. Based on these historical sources, this paper explains how ancients used games to approach new people and create the kind of atmosphere that preludes to romance, or sexual intercourse. It presents the different shades of this topic and, when possible, sheds light on its evolutionary process throughout Greek and Roman history.*

**Keywords:** board games, knucklebones, dice, sex, seduction.

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Playing is a consistent and essential part of human and animal life, and playfulness is deeply connected with happiness and sociability. Playing helps us to shape our view of the world, express our imagination and release pressure and tensions, but can also enhance our social relations and foster our interpersonal skills. It is an activity in which we humans indulge when we are in good spirit, and in the company of people with whom we want to share our feelings, interests, and passions.

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Even if we don't know as much as we would about ancient gaming practices, Greek and Latin literatures provide us with a lot of details about the social, cultural, economic, political or juridical implications of play. Unexpectedly, ancient authors provided us plenty of information also on the private life of their peers, telling us how games were connected with their sexual lives. Adding a little bit of playfulness could be of help to soften some situations, and to make some others more intense... or harder, we might say.

This contribution, based on literary and archaeological sources, will shed a light on the connection between games and romance, sensuality, seduction, and sex in antiquity, presenting it in all its shades and proving that, even in antiquity, being a good player was a true asset for interpersonal relations.

### **Play to enjoy life**

In ancient Greece and Rome play was considered a pleasurable activity like eating and drinking, studying and learning, relaxing at the shade of a portico or attending parties with friends. Ancient authors suggest that all those activities often occurred concurrently, like discussing of philosophy and literature at a banquet<sup>2</sup> or breaking the rhythm of studying with games that can help to keep the learner's mind active.<sup>3</sup>

Taking advantage of all the pleasures of life, in different combinations, would have led to a very joyful and meaningful life that, even if ephemeral, was worth being lived. This concept has been very well expressed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by the Greek comedian Amphis:

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<sup>2</sup> As widely remarked by several sources. As an example, we report the famous Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistai*.

<sup>3</sup> Pl., *Resp.* 7, 536e–537a; Arist. *Pol.* 7, 1336a.

Drink and play, our mortal life  
 On earth can but a brief space last;  
 Death alone will last for ever,  
 When once our too brief term is past.<sup>4</sup>

This passage shows how, in the common imagination of ancient Greeks, enjoying the pleasures of life was counterposed to death. The same idea was expressed a century before by Telecleides, another Athenian comedian, in a passage where he described how the gods originally arranged life for humans, presenting those things that ancient Greeks considered as ideal or stereotypes of pleasure:

I will, then, tell of the life of old which I provided for mortals.  
 First, there was peace over all, like water over hands. The earth produced no terror and no disease; on the other hand, things needful came of their own accord. Every torrent flowed with wine, barley-cakes strove with wheat-loaves for men's lips, beseeching that they be swallowed if men loved the whitest. Fishes would come to the house and bake themselves, then serve themselves on the tables. A river of broth, whirling hot slices of meat, would flow by the couches; conduits full of piquant sauces for the meat were close at hand for the asking, so that there was plenty for moistening a mouthful and swallowing it tender.  
 On dishes there would be honey-cakes all sprinkled with spices, and roast thrushes served up with milk-cakes were flying into the gullet. The flat-cakes jostled each other at the jaws and set up a racket, the

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<sup>4</sup> Amphis, Fr. II 238 K, in Ath. 7, 14: πῖνε, παῖζε: θνητὸς ὁ βίος, ὀλίγος οὐπὶ γῇ χρόνος: ὁ θάνατος δ' ἀθάνατός ἐστιν, ἅν' ἅπαξ τις ἀποθάνῃ.

slaves would shoot knucklebones with slices of paunch and tid-bits.  
Men were fat in those days and every bit mighty giants.<sup>5</sup>

This is how an ancient Greek imagined the ‘perfect’ life: no war, no diseases, and no concerns about quantity, quality, or variety of food. The abundance of food was so overwhelming that even youngsters, playing knucklebones, could put at stake exquisite (and also expensive) meat preparations.

### **Knucklebones, love, play, and a drink... please**

Telecleides fits knucklebones into this convivial picture. Those gaming instruments appear often associated with banquets and festive events in both the Greek and Latin literature, as attested by Plautus in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC:

PHILEMATIUM: Come, take your place, then. Boy, bring some water for the hands; put a little table here. See where are the knucklebones. Would you like some perfumes?<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Telecleides, fr. 1, 8–15 K.–A. in Ath. 6, 95 (268a–d): λέξω τοίνυν βίον ἐξ ἀρχῆς ὃν ἐγὼ θνητοῖσι παρῆχον. εἰρήνη μὲν πρῶτον ἀπάντων ἦν ὥσπερ ὕδωρ κατὰ χειρός. ἡ γῆ δ’ ἔφερ’ οὐ δέος οὐδὲ νόσους, ἀλλ’ αὐτόματ’ ἦν τὰ δέοντα· οἶνω γὰρ ἅπασ’ ἔρρει χαράδρα, μᾶζαι δ’ ἄρτοις ἐμάχοντο περὶ τοῖς στόμασιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἰκετεύουσai καταπίνειν, εἴ τι φιλοῖεν, τὰς λευκοτάτας. οἱ δ’ ἰχθύες οἰκαδ’ ἰόντες ἐξοπτῶντες σφᾶς αὐτοὺς ἂν παρέκειντ’ ἐπὶ ταῖσι τραπέζαις. ζωμοῦ δ’ ἔρρει παρὰ τὰς κλῖνας ποταμὸς κρέα θερμὰ κυλίνδων, ὑποτριμματίων δ’ ὀχετοὶ τούτων τοῖς βουλομένοισι παρήσαν, ὥστ’ ἀφθονία τὴν ἐνθεσιν ἦν ἄρδονθ’ ἀπαλὴν καταπίνειν. λεκανίσκαισιν δ’ ἑ ἀνάπαιστα ἑ παρὴν ἡδυσματίοις κατάπαστα. ὅπται δὲ κίχλαι μετ’ ἀμητίσκων εἰς τὸν φάρυγ’ εἰσεπέτοντο· τῶν δὲ πλακούντων ὥστιζομένων περὶ τὴν γνάθον ἦν ἀλαλητός. μήτρας δὲ τόμοις καὶ χναυματίοις οἱ παῖδες ἂν ἡστραγάλιζον. οἱ δ’ ἀνθρώποι πίονες ἦσαν τότε καὶ μέγα χρῆμα γιγάντων. (translated by Burton GULICK, lightly modified).

<sup>6</sup> Plaut. *Mostell.* 1, 3, 150–151: *Philematio: Age accumbe igitur. cedo aquam manibus, puere, appone hic mensulam. Vide, tali ubi sint. vin unguenta?*

The same concept was expressed by the Latin author Sextus Turpilius about a century later. He describes a very similar situation, but differently from Plautus he includes romance too in the picture:

A garland, a set table, knucklebones, and wine: things of this kind, of which the Life is accustomed to invite lovers.<sup>7</sup>

Even in this fragment of Turpilius where explicit mention of death is omitted, we can easily figure out that those pleasures to which 'Life' (lt. *Vita*) which invite the lovers, are implicitly opposed to death, which may separate them. A century later, Horace juxtaposes death and pleasures again in his Odes:

Pale death knocks with impartial foot, at the door of the poor man's cottage, and at the prince's gate. O Sestus, my friend, the span of brief life prevents us from ever depending on distant hope.

Soon the night will crush you, the fabled spirits, and Pluto's bodiless halls: where once you've passed inside you'll no longer be allotted the lordship of wine by knucklebones, or marvel at Lycidas, so tender, for whom, already, the boys are burning, and soon the girls will grow hotter.<sup>8</sup>

The recursive presence of knucklebones in banquet scenes didn't happen randomly. They were used to play during a symposium, but also to

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<sup>7</sup> Sextus Turpilius, Fr. Thrasyleon, 201–202: *Corónam mensam tálos uinum, haec huius modi, Quibus rébus uita amántum inuitari solet.*

<sup>8</sup> Hor. *Carm.* 1, 4: *Pallida Mors aequo pulsat pede pauperum tabernas regumque turris. O beate Sesti, vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat inchoare longam; iam te premet nox fabulaeque Manes et domus exilis Plutonia; quo simul mearis, nec regna vini sortiere talis nec tenerum Lycidan mirabere, quo calet iuventus nunc omnis et mox virgines tepebunt.*

gamify some aspects of it like appointing the ‘lordship of wine’, which means to choose the one who would have led the cheering during the party.

### The Venus’s Throw

In one of his Odes, Horace tells that the one appointed as ‘King of Wine’ in a banquet was he who casts the knucklebones and gets the ‘highest’ score, which had a significative name:

Who will twine the hasty wreath from myrtle-tree or parsley? Whom  
will Venus seat Chairman of cups? Are Bacchants sane? Then I’ll be  
sober. O, ‘tis sweet  
To fool, when friends come home again!<sup>9</sup>

Knucklebones could be used to play a great variety of games, and one of them consisted of casting four knucklebones and getting a special role called ‘Venus’, in reference to the goddess of love. This resulted when all knucklebones landed with a different one the four possible faces revealed.

We don’t know exactly if this was a Roman tradition, or if it was derived from Greece. It’s first mention in Latin occurs in Plautus (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC),<sup>10</sup> while the first mention in the Greek language occurs in Roman times (2<sup>nd</sup> century, attested in Lucian<sup>11</sup>). But it’s interesting however, to know that games, love, drinks, and banquets were intertwined.

In visual art, knucklebones might also be a symbol of love, pleasure, and good luck. Four knucklebones, representing the cast of Venus,

<sup>9</sup> Hor. *Carm.*, 2, 7: *quis udo deproperare apio coronas curatve myrto? quem Venus arbitrum dicet bibendi? non ego sanius bacchabor Edonis: recepto dulce mihi furere est amico.*

<sup>10</sup> Plaut. *Asin.* 5, 2, 55.

<sup>11</sup> Lucian, *Erotes (Amores)* 15–16.

are carved in different ancient gems. On one they surround the name or Eros,<sup>12</sup> while on another, a cornucopia and the words ‘Memento Po’ (*remember about Po*).<sup>13</sup> This last gem must have been a gift and ‘Po’ may have been the initials of the giver.

On another gem, knucklebones surround a skull crowned by a diadem, and aside the skull there are a bread and an amphora of wine.<sup>14</sup> The meaning of these symbols is clear: death is ruling the world and can’t be escaped, but in the meantime you can eat, drink and love to enjoy life as much as possible.



<sup>12</sup> Akademisches Kunstmuseum Bonn, Gerhard Nr. 28.2023.

<sup>13</sup> Akademisches Kunstmuseum Bonn, Gerhard Nr. 28.2011.

<sup>14</sup> ROHLFS (1964). fig.2.

## Knucklebones, Venus, Eros, and Love

We can't determine exactly where and when this connection between knucklebones and the goddess Venus originated, but we know that ancient Greeks linked knucklebones to her son Eros.

Since the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, he is represented as a child playing knucklebones<sup>15</sup> or on vases in the shape of knucklebones.<sup>16</sup> The reason might be that in the common imagination Eros was a child and knucklebones were among the most appreciated toys by Greek children. But this connection between Eros and knucklebones might rely on another, deeper bond: Eros and Venus were finally anthropomorphic representations of the concept of 'love' and knucklebones were already connected with this emotion via a quite complicated and articulated symbolism.

Plato says that already in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC knucklebones could be considered as metaphors of Love, in a passage of the *Symposium* where he tells the Aristophanes' myth of the androgyne, a creature with one male and one female half, who was split in two parts by Zeus. The passage about the androgyne is entirely devoted to the concept of 'love' and 'eros':

The cause of it all is this, that our original form was as I have described, and we were entire; and the craving and pursuit of that entirety is called Love. Formerly, as I have said, we were one; but now for our sins we are all dispersed by God, as the Arcadians were by the Lacedaemonians; and we may well be afraid that if we are disorderly towards Heaven we may once more be cloven asunder and may go about in the shape of those outline-carvings on the tombs, with our

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<sup>15</sup> British Museum Inventory number: 1856,1226.8; Musée Romaine de Avenches, inv 88/6564; MFA, Boston, inventory number 27.700.

<sup>16</sup> Metropolitan Museum of New York, Accession Number: 40.11.22.

noses sawn down the middle, and may thus become like tokens of split knucklebones. Wherefore we ought all to exhort our neighbors to a pious observance of the gods, in order that we may escape harm and attain to bliss under the gallant leadership of Love.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, archaeologists found knucklebones cut in two halves in several religious sites.<sup>18</sup> They were cut so to split the concave and the convex side (in game, corresponded to 3 and 4), and the real meaning of this practice is still debatable. We don't know exactly if they were offered by ancients as love tokens, just as actual teenagers attach lockers on bridges. Knucklebones were polysemic objects and their meanings and values might have varied from region to region. In most cases, the lack of literary sources forces us to adopt a speculative attitude, but this passage of Plato allow us to say that at least part of those cut knucklebones must have had a romantic meaning.

### Unexpected feelings...

This symbolic association between knucklebones and love might be determined by the unknown origin of this feeling, and the little control that the human mind has on it. For this reason love, it was considered as a having and origin of 'divine influence' similar to the way that the unexpected or random results of a throw of knucklebones were con-

<sup>17</sup> Pl. *Symp.* 192e–193b: τοῦτο γάρ ἐστι τὸ αἴτιον, ὅτι ἡ ἀρχαία φύσις ἡμῶν ἦν αὕτη καὶ ἦμεν ὅλοι· τοῦ ὅλου οὖν τῇ ἐπιθυμίᾳ καὶ διώξει ἔρως ὄνομα. καὶ πρὸ τοῦ, ὥσπερ λέγω, ἐν ἡμεν, νυνὶ δὲ διὰ τὴν ἀδικίαν διωκίσθημεν ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, καθάπερ Ἀρκάδες ὑπὸ Λακεδαιμονίων· φόβος οὖν ἔστιν, ἐὰν μὴ κόσμιοι ὦμεν πρὸς τοὺς θεούς, ὅπως μὴ καὶ αὐθις διασχισθῶμεθα, καὶ περίμεν ἔχοντες ὥσπερ οἱ ἐν ταῖς στήλαις καταγραφὴν ἐκτετυπωμένοι, διαπεπρισμένοι κατὰ τὰς ῥῖνας, γεγονότες ὥσπερ λίσπαι. ἀλλὰ τούτων ἔνεκα πάντ' ἄνδρα χρὴ ἅπαντα παρακελεύεσθαι εὐσεβεῖν περὶ θεούς, ἵνα τὰ μὲν ἐκφύγωμεν, τῶν δὲ τύχωμεν, ὡς ὁ Ἑρως ἡμῖν ἡγεμὼν καὶ στρατηγός.

<sup>18</sup> AMANDRY (1984: 347–380).

cieved. This seems to be the meaning of the Anacreon fragment, dated to 6<sup>th</sup> century BC:

Knucklebones of Eros are madness and mellays.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, in this fragment, the word ‘knucklebones’ is written as a feminine noun, while generally it is rendered in the masculine.

The image of Eros as a child who plays with human feelings remained for centuries in the common imagination of ancient Greeks and Romans. In this way Asclepiades of Samos in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC described his tormented personal life, connecting game, pleasure and love to the inner will to live:

I am not yet two and twenty, and life is a burden to me. Ye Loves, why thus maltreat me; why set me afire? For if I perish, what will you do? Clearly, Loves, you will play, silly children, at your knucklebones as before.<sup>20</sup>

Meleager makes a similar point between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> century BC:

Love, the baby still in his mother’s lap, playing at knucklebones in the morning, played my soul away.<sup>21</sup>

And Phylodemus, a few decades later, as collected in the same Anthology again makes the connection:

<sup>19</sup> Anac. fr. 47 (398 PMG) in Scholia in Homerum, Iliadem, 23,88: “ἀστραγάλαι δ’ Ἐρωτός εἰσιν μανίαι τε καὶ κυδοιμοί

<sup>20</sup> Asclepiades, *Anth. Pal.* 12, 46: οὐκ εἴμ’ οὐδ’ ἐτέων δύο κεῖκοσι, καὶ κοπιῶ ζῶν. / ὦρωτες, τί κακὸν τοῦτο; τί με φλέγετε; / ἦν γὰρ ἐγὼ τι πάθω, τί ποιήσετε; δηλον, Ἐρωτες, / ὥς τὸ πάρος παίξεσθ’ ἄφρονες ἀστραγάλοις.

<sup>21</sup> Meleager, *Anth. Pal.* 12, 47: ματρός ἔτ’ ἐν κόλποισιν ὁ νήπιος ὀρθρινὰ παίζων / ἀστραγάλοις τοῦμὸν πνεῦμ’ ἐκύβευσεν Ἐρως.

As often as I come to Cydilla's embrace, whether I come in the day-time, or more venturesome still in the evening, I know that I hold my path on the edge of a precipice, I know that each time I throw all the dice on my heag. But what advantage is it to me to know that? My heart is bold, and when Love ever leads it, it knows not at all even the shadow of fear.<sup>22</sup>

While the Greek poets seemed to have felt uncomfortable at the idea that Eros, with his wind of passion, could suddenly and unexpectedly beat upon them, the Latin writer Ovid is willing to abandon himself to Love and so exhort the young son of Venus:

A child you are, and like a child You should play.<sup>23</sup>

The Latin poet Propertius relies on the same symbolism, and pushing things further alludes to sexual and physical implications of this warm feeling, and describes a situation which may still looks very actual (at least to those of us who celebrate their birthdays at bed):

Let us play at fortunes with a cast of knucklebones to reveal which of us two the winged god beats the harder with his wings. When the hours have been spent in many cups, and Venus prepares the sacred ceremonies of the night, let us perform anniversary rites on our couch and so complete the course of your birthday.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Anth. Pal.* 5, 25: ὅσσάκι Κυδίλλης ὑποκόλπιος, εἴτε κατ' ἡμαρ, / εἴτ' ἀποτολμήσας ἤλυθον ἐσπέριος, / οἶδ' ὅτι παρ κρημνὸν τέμνω πόρον, οἶδ' ὅτι ῥιπτῶ / πάντα κύβον κεφαλῆς αἰὲν ὕπερθεν ἐμῆς. / ἀλλὰ τί μοι πλεον ἐστί; † γὰρ θρασύς, ἡδ' ὅταν ἔλκη / πάντοτ' ἔρω, ἀρχὴν οὐδ' ὄναρ οἶδε φόβου.

<sup>23</sup> *Ov. Rem. Am.* 23–24: *Et puer es, nec te quicquam nisi ludere oportet; Lude*

<sup>24</sup> *Prop.* 3, 10, 27–32: *Sit sors et nobis talorum interprete iactu, / quem gravibus pennis verberet ille puer. / Cum fuerit multis exacta trientibus hora, / noctis et instituet sacra ministra Venus, / annua solvamus thalamo sollemnia nostro, / natalisque tui sic peragamus iter.*

## Before to play, learn the rules

The Greek authors quoted in the previous paragraphs seem to have been caught by surprise by Love.

The only one who, according to what he wrote, knew how to play the game of love was Propertius. In fact, just as a board game, relational life requires the knowledge of a few rules, a little bit of experience and practice. And the one who wrote the best manual about love and seduction in antiquity was Ovid. In his book, he made sure to include a series of gaming suggestion for girls:

A few things shameful to mention, she must know how to call the throws at knucklebones, and your values, you rolled dice: sometimes throwing three, sometimes thinking, closely, how to advance craftily, how to challenge.

She should play the battle of the *Latrunculi*;<sup>25</sup> match warily not rashly, where one piece can be lost to two opponents, and a warrior wars without his companion who's been taken, and a rival often has to retrace the journey he began.

Light spills should be poured from the open bag, nor should a spill be disturbed unless she can raise it.

There's a kind of game, the board squared-off by as many lines, with precise calculation, as the fleeting year has months: a smaller board presents three stones each on either side where the winner will have made his line up together.

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<sup>25</sup> *Latrunculi* was a strategy game, very popular at the time of Ovid. The game consisted in a battle between two groups of counters, eventually made of glass. It was possible to kill an enemy piece by surrounding it with two pieces on the two opposite sides. For this reason, the pieces that remained isolated on the board must be retreated towards other allied counters, so to avoid to be surrounded.

There's a thousand games to be had: it's shameful for a girl not to know how to play: playing often brings on love.

But there's not much labour in knowing all the moves: there's much more work in keeping to your rules.

We're reckless, and revealed by eagerness itself, and in a game the naked heart's exposed:

Anger enters, ugly mischief, desire for gain, quarrels and fights and anxious pain:

accusations fly, the air echoes with shouts, and each calls on their outraged deities:

there's no honour, they seek to cancel their debts at whim: and often I've seen cheeks wet with tears.

Jupiter keep you free from all such vile reproaches, you who have any anxiety to please men.<sup>26</sup>

In his work, Ovid also includes a few suggestions for his male readers:

Yield to opposition: by yielding you'll end as victor: Only play the part she commands you to.

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<sup>26</sup> OY. *Ars am.* 3, 353–384: *Parva monere pudet, talorum dicere iactus Ut sciat, et vires, tes-sera missa, tuas: Et modo tres iactet numeros, modo cogitet, apte quam subeat partem callida, quamque vocet. Cautaque non stulte latronum proelia ludat, Unus cum gemino calculus hoste perit, Bellatorque sua prensus sine compare bellat, Aemulus et coeptum saepe recurrit iter. Reticuloque pilae leves fundantur aperto, Nec, nisi quam tolles, ulla movenda pila est. Est genus, in totidem tenui ratione redactum Scriptula, quot menses lubricus annus habet: Parva tabella capit ternos utrimque lapillos, In qua vicisse est continuasse suos. Mille facesse iocos; turpe est nescire puellam Ludere: ludendo saepe paratur amor. Sed minimus labor est sapienter iactibus uti: Maius opus mores composuisse suos. Tum sumus incauti, studioque aperimur in ipso, Nudaque per lusus pectora nostra patent; Ira subit, deforme malum, lucrique cupido, Iurgiaeque et rixae sollicitusque dolor: Crimina dicuntur, resonat clamoribus aether, Invocat iratos et sibi quisque deos: Nulla fides, tabulaeque novae per vota petuntur; Et lacrimis vidi saepe madere genas. Iuppiter a vobis tam turpia crimina pellat, In quibus est ulli cura placere viro.*

Condemn what she condemns, what she approves, approve, say what she says, deny what she denies.

She laughs, you laugh: remember to cry, if she cries. She'll set the rules according to your expression. If she plays, tossing the ivory dice in her hand, throw them wrong, and concede on your bad throw: If you play knucklebones, no prize if you win, make out that often the ruinous low Dogs fell to you.

And if it's draughts, the draughtsmen mercenaries, let your champion be swept away by your glass foe.<sup>27</sup>

Today Ovid would have been a successful blogger, but at his time he was exiled for it, even if his chapters about games and seduction must have been useful to many people.

### **Who were players? Gender gap in ancient gaming practices**

Ancient authors were essentially men and reported mostly about male gaming activities. This heavily gendered perspective generated a relevant bias in our knowledge that could easily induce the thought that board games were mostly of male domain.

Like other aspects of ancient everyday life, toys and games could be gendered and some effectively were. But a few inscriptions and quotations and some iconographic sources attest that girls and women played board games too.

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<sup>27</sup> Ov. *Ars Am.* 2, 197–208: *Cede repugnanti: cedendo victor abibis: Fac modo, quas partes illa iubebit, agas. Arguet, arguito; quicquid probat illa, probato; Quod dicet, dicas; quod negat illa, neges. Riserit, adride; si flebit, flere memento; Imponat leges vultibus illa tuis. Seu ludet, numerosque manu iactabit eburnos, Tu male iactato, tu male iacta dato: Seu iacies talos, victam ne poena sequatur, Damnosi facito stent tibi saepe canes: Sive latrocinii sub imagine calculus ibit, Fac pereat vitreo miles ab hoste tuus.*

Two passages of the Palatine Anthology, quoted also by the Byzantine Suda<sup>28</sup>, report that when children grew and prepared for adult life, they offered their games and toys to the temple. This tradition is attested for males and females, and in both cases, knucklebones are included in the list:

To Hermes Philocles here hangs up these toys of his boyhood: his noiseless ball, this lively boxwood rattle, his knucklebones he had such a mania for, and his spinning top.<sup>29</sup>

Hippe, the maiden, has put up her abundant curly hair, brushing it from her perfumed temples, for the solemn time when she must wed has come, and I the snood that used to rest there require in my wearer the grace of virginity. But, Artemis, in thy loving kindness grant to Lycomedes' child, who has bidden farewell to her knucklebones, both a husband and children.<sup>30</sup>

Knucklebones were indeed considered as toys and gaming instruments by both males and females, and it seems that the games played with them changed according to the age of the player. Children considered knuck-

<sup>28</sup> Suda λ 810: Λυκομήδειος. τῇ Λυκομηδείου παιδί φιλαστραγάλη. "Lycomedeios: To / for the daughter of Lykomedeios, who loves to play with knucklebones." Suda ι 425: Ἰότητι: βουλῇσει, γνώμη. Ἄρτεμι, σῇ δ' ἰότητι γάμος θ' ἅμα καὶ γένος εἴη τῇ Λυκομηδείου παιδί φιλαστραγάλη. Iotiti: [Meaning] by desire, by decision: "Artemis, by your will may the knucklebone-loving daughter of Lykomedeios have marriage and offspring."

<sup>29</sup> *Anth. Pal.* 6, 309: εὐφημόν τοι σφαῖραν, ἐυκρόταλόν τε Φιλοκλῆς Ἑρμείη ταύτην πυξινέην πλατάγην, ἀστραγάλας θ' αἷς πόλλ' ἐπεμήνατο, καὶ τὸν ἐλικτὸν ῥόμβον, κουροσύνης παίγνι' ἀνεκρέμασεν.

<sup>30</sup> *Anth. Pal.* 6, 276: ἡ πολὺθριξ οὐλας ἀνεδήσατο παρθένος Ἴππη χαίτας, εὐώδη σμηχομένα κρόταφον ἥδη γάρ οἱ ἐπῆλθε γάμου τέλος: αἱ δ' ἐπὶ κόρσῃ μίτραι παρθενίας αἰτέομεν χάριτας. Ἄρτεμι, σῇ δ' ἰότητι γάμος θ' ἅμα καὶ γένος εἴη τῇ Λυκομηδείου παιδί λιπαστραγάλη.

lebones more as toys,<sup>31</sup> while adults might have been more interested in their use as casting or divining objects valued for their random results.

A famous terracotta group handcrafted in Campania in the late IV century BC, and now in the British Museum,<sup>32</sup> represents two women playing with knucklebones. They might be playing *Pleistobolinda*.<sup>33</sup> This aim of this game was getting the highest score, and play consisted of throwing several knucklebones in sequence, and aiming, at every throw, to hit the bones already on the ground, thereby changing their scores in order to accrue more points.

During the Hellenic times female players became a recurrent subject in visual art, attested by further sculptures<sup>34</sup> and paintings,<sup>35</sup> and we might assume that many others have since been lost. The existence of other frescoes with the same subject is reported by Pausanias:

Polygnotus has painted them as girls crowned with flowers and playing with knucklebones and gives them the names of Cameiro and Clytie.<sup>36</sup>

Those artistic representations, on one hand attest to women's attitude towards play, but on the other, convey an artistic topos and might not be always representative of real life. Unfortunately, ancient authors paid little attention to female habits and provided us with just a few descriptions of women playing games. We however assume that females played much more than what is represented by ancient art and literature.

<sup>31</sup> Pl. *Lys.* 206e; Plut. *Quaest. Conv.* 9, 12 (741c); Poll. *Onom.* 9, 103; Hsch. *Lexicon*, entry τρόπα; Phot. *Lexicon*, entry τρόπα.

<sup>32</sup> BM inventory n° 1867,0510.1

<sup>33</sup> Poll. *Onom.* 9, 116; Hsch. *Lexicon*, π 2517; Phot. *Lexicon*, π 934, π 935; Suda, π 1738.

<sup>34</sup> Just two samples: Altes Museum Berlin, Sk 494; British Museum, 1805,0703.13.

<sup>35</sup> Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 9562.

<sup>36</sup> Paus. 10, 30, 2: Πολύγνωτος δὲ κόρας τε ἐστεφανωμένας ἄνθεσι καὶ παιζούσας ἔγραψεν ἀστραγάλοις, ὄνομα δὲ αὐταῖς Καμειρῶ τε καὶ Κλυτίῃ.

Plutarch reports that during the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC Persian women, at least those of the upper class, used to play,<sup>37</sup> and Suetonius copied a letter that Augustus wrote to his daughter Julia, where it seems that she was accustomed to playing knucklebones with friends (and gambling too):

I send you two hundred and fifty denarii, the sum which I gave each of my guests, in case they wished to play knucklebones or at odd and even during the dinner.<sup>38</sup>

### Games and seduction

The most interesting literary passage, that implicitly attests to how males and females considered games as instruments of seduction, is from Plautus' *Asinaria*.

In this comedy *Parasite*, a male character, helps *Diabolus*, another male character, to write a letter for a lady with some instructions about how to behave during a banquet.

Reading between the lines, we can figure out that many of the strategies mentioned by the comedian were taken from real life situations that occurred in Rome during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC:

PARASITE: [...] Then she is to drink cup by cup equally with yourself. She is to receive it from you; she is to hand it to you for you to drink. She is not to have a relish for less or for more than yourself."

DIABOLUS: Oh! That's quite to my taste.

PARASITE: (reading) "She is to remove all causes of suspicion from her, nor is she to tread on any man's foot with her foot; when she rises she

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<sup>37</sup> Plut. *Artax.* 17, 1–6.

<sup>38</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 71: *Misi tibi denarios ducentos quinquaginta, quos singulis convivis dederam, si vellent inter se inter cenam vel talis vel par impar ludere.*

is neither to step upon the next couch, nor when she gets down from the couch is she thence to extend her hand to any one; she is not to give to nor ask of any one a ring for her to look at; she is not to present knucklebones to any man whatever except to yourself; when she throws them, she is not to say, You I call upon,' she is to mention your name. She may call on any Goddess that she pleases as propitious to her, but on no God: if she should chance to be very full of devotion, she is to tell you, and you are to pray to him that he may be propitious. She is neither to nod at any man, wink, or make a sign. In fine, if the lamp goes out, she is not to move a single joint of herself in the dark." DIABOLUS: That's very good; so, in fact, she must do: but expunge that about the chamber; for my part, I prefer that she should move. I don't wish her to have an excuse, and to say that it is forbidden her by her vow.<sup>39</sup>

Since the highest score was entitled to Venus, or to the concept of 'Love', when a Roman cast knucklebones, they often invoked the name of Venus, or the name of a beloved one. This could also reveal erotic, sexual, romantic orientation or preferences.

We can imagine that calling someone's name while throwing knucklebones could sound like a declaration, expressing romantic feelings or sexual desire. This is what Plautus again tells in further comedies. In the *Curculio*, Phaedro is astonished to know that another man invoked the name of his beloved while playing knucklebones:

<sup>39</sup> Plaut. *Asin.* 4, 771–791: PAR. *Tecum una potet, aequè pocla potitet: abs ted accipiat, tibi propinet, tu bibas, ne illa minus aut plus quam tu sapiat.* DIAB. *Satis placet.* PAR. *Suspiciones omnes ab se segreget. Neque illaec ulli pede pedem homini premat, cum surgat, neque <cum> in lectum inscendat proximum, neque cum descendat inde, det cuiquam manum: spectandum ne cui anulum det neque roget. Talos ne cuiquam homini admoueat nisi tibi. Cum iaciat, 'te' ne dicat: nomen nominet. deam inuocet sibi quam libebit propitiam, deum nullum; si magis religiosa fuerit, tibi dicat: tu pro illa ores ut sit propitius. neque illa ulli homini nutet, nictet, annuat. Post, si lucerna exstincta sit, ne quid sui membri commoueat quicquam in tenebris.* DIAB. *optumest. Ita scilicet facturam. Verum in cubiculodeme istuc—equidem illam moueri gestio. Nolo illam habere causam et uotitam dicere.*

CURCULIO: [...] After we had dined and well drunk, he asked for the dice to be fetched him. He challenged me to play with him a game of hazard. I staked my cloak, he staked his ring against it; he called on the name of Planesium.

PHAEDRO: What, my mistress?

CURCULIO: Be silent a while. He threw a most losing cast. I took up the dice, and invoked Hercules as my genial patron; I threw a first-rate cast, and pledged him in a bumping cup; in return he drank it off, reclined his head, and fell fast asleep. I slyly took away from him the ring, and took my legs quietly from off the couch, so that the captain mightn't perceive it.<sup>40</sup>

And Plautus' comedy *Captivi* starts with a monologue of Ergasilus. This character, always hungry and willing to take advantage of a free lunch, having been excluded from a banquet, pretends to enter since he is invoked by young men playing knucklebones:

ERGASILUS: The young men have given me the name of "the mistress," for this reason, because invocated I am wont to attend at the banquet. I know that buffoons say that this is absurdly said, but I affirm that it is rightly said. For at the banquet the lover, when he throws the knucklebones, invokes his mistress. Is she then invocated, or is she not? She is, most clearly.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Plaut. *Curc.* 2, 3, 354–361: *Curc.* [...] *postquam cenati atque appoti, talos poscit sibi in manum, provocat me in aleam, ut ego ludam: pono pallium; ille suum amiculum opposivit, invocat Planesium. Phaed.* Meosne amores? *Curc.* Tace parumper. *iacit volturios quattuor. talos arripio, invoco almam meam nutricem Hérculem, iacto basilicum; propino magnum poculum: ille ebibit, caput deponit, condormiscit. Ego ei subduco anulum deduco pedes de lecto clam, ne miles sentiat*

<sup>41</sup> Plaut. *Capt.* 1, 1, 1–5: *Erg.* *Iuventus nomen indidit Scorto mihi, eo quia invocatus soleo esse in convivio. scio absúrde dictum hoc derisores dicere, at ego aio recte. nam scortum in convivio sibi amator, talos quom iacit, scortum invocat. Estne invocatum an non est? Est planissime!*

## Games, gifts and seduction

Since they were so appreciated, games could also be suitable gifts to attract someone's attention. But according to what Glaucus of Nicopolis says, it worked just until a certain age:

There was a time long, long ago, when boys who like presents were won by a quail, or a sewn ball, or knucklebones, but now they want rich dishes or money, and those playthings have no power. Search for something else, ye lovers of boys.<sup>42</sup>

Another author remarks an interesting fact. Since games were often used to gamble, to win meant also to gain enough money that could be used to buy a better and more expensive gift for the beloved one. In the following text, Aristaenetus represents the point of view of an unlucky player opposed to a luckier one. The names he chooses are respectively *Monochoros*, or 'he who plays on a single square', and *Philokubos*, or 'he who is beloved by the dice'.

He probably alluded to the *Tabula* or *Alea* game, predecessor of Backgammon, where the winner is the first player to exit the path with all their counters. So, *Monochoros* is the player who can't move and remains stuck in the same place, while *Philokubos* always gets good scores and makes progress:

A dice player in love (the double misfortune). *Monochoros* to *Philokybos*

I fell victim to two dreadful things at once, dear friend, and though

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<sup>42</sup> Glaucus of Nicopolis, *Anth. Pal.* 12, 44: ἦν ὅτε παῖδας ἔπειθε πάλαι ποτὲ δῶρα φιλεῦντας / ὄρνυξ, καὶ ῥαπτὴ σφαῖρα, καὶ ἀστράγαλοι: / νῦν δὲ λοπὰς καὶ κέρμα: τὰ παίγνια δ' οὐδὲν ἐκεῖνα / ἰσχύει. ζητεῖτ' ἄλλο τι, παιδοφίλαι.

I can just about cope with one of these at a time, the addition of the second tips the scales and I end up suffering a double misfortune. The one is bad, the other no better.

I've been wrecked by an insatiable hetaira and by unlucky throws of the dice, unlucky for me but beneficial to my adversaries: when I play knucklebones or dice with rivals in love, my brain gets befuddled in the frenzy of desire; as a result I confuse the various moves of the gaming pieces and am beaten by players who are less competent than I.

For often, in a transport of desire, I throw the dice but move their pieces, not my own. And then, when I go off to my beloved, I suffer a second defeat there, worse than the first.

For my rivals, lucky in the winnings they extract from my pocket, are able to give more precious gifts to my darling, and she prefers them for those gifts. Fighting me with my own resources, they prevent me from ever getting lucky in the game of love. And so each of the two misfortunes magnifies the other.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, the point of the composition is that the one beloved by both players would have elected the richest one, which implies that she was a prostitute.

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<sup>43</sup> Aristaenetus, *Ep. Eroticae*, I, 23: Ἐρωτικός κυβευτῆς περὶ ἀμφότερα δυστυχῆς Μονόχωρος φιλοκύβω. Δύο δεινοῖς ἅμα περιπέπτωκα, φίλε, καὶ πρὸς ἓν τούτων μόλις ὀποτερονοῦν διακρῶν ἐξ ἐπιμέτρου θάτερον ἔχω, καὶ διπλάσια δυστυχῶ. Καὶ τὸ μὲν κακόν, τὸ δὲ οὐκ ἄμεινον. Ἐμὲ γὰρ κατανάλωσαν ἅπληστος ἐταῖρα καὶ πεσσοὶ πίπτοντες ἀτυχῶς μὲν ἐμοί, εὐβολώτερον δὲ τοῖς ἐναντίοις. Ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ἀντερῶσιν ἀστραγαλίζων ἢ κυβεύων συγχέομαι τὸν νοῦν, τοῦ ἔρωτος μεμνηνότες, κἀντεῦθεν περὶ τὰς ποικίλας μεταστάσεις τῶν ψῆφων πολλὰ παραλογιζόμενος ἑμαυτὸν καὶ τῶν καταδεεστέρων τὴν παιδιὰν ἡττῶμαι. Πολλάκις γὰρ μετέωρος ἐκ τοῦ τόθου ταῖς ἡμετέραις βολαῖς ἀντὶ τῶν ἐμῶν τὰς ἐκείνων διατίθημι ψήφους. Εἴτα πρὸς τὴν ἐρωμένην ἀπιὼν ἐκεῖ δευτέραν ἡτταν ὑπομένω καὶ χείρονα τῆς προτέρας. Οἱ γὰρ εὐτυχεῖς ἀντερασταί, ἅτε δή με τὰ τοσαῦτα νενικηκότες, φιλοτιμότερον δωροῦνται τῇ ποθουμένη, καὶ προκρίνονται μοι τοῖς δώροις, κἄτα τῶν ἐμῶν ἐμὲ πολεμοῦντες μεταπεττεύουσίν μοι τῆς φιλίας κύβον. Οὕτω τοίνυν ἐκάτερον τῶν κακῶν διὰ θάτερον γέγονε δυστυχέστερον.

## Unpleasant implications

The connection between games and sex also hides some issues. The connection between games and prostitution is underlined by literary sources of every kind and gambling houses were associated with brothels at least since the V century BC:

Then if I went to a fool's house, he would throw beside dice and prostitutes, and very soon I should be completely stripped and pitched out of doors.<sup>44</sup>

Often, in antiquity, playing meant gambling, even for huge amounts of money, and this seems to have been a peculiar male habit.

Unfortunately, sex workers rarely consented and most of them were forced to become prostitutes. Taken into slavery, they were considered as objects and instruments to make money by their pimps, and could be bought and sold, won or lost on a cast of dice.

Mandres sold off Cretinas very quickly. The Ephesians conquered Cretinas in the land of Magnesia: she was sold by Mandres, son of Mandrolitos, for some wine, and drink, and a game of dice.<sup>45</sup>

The same unpleasant habit is reported also in Latin literature:

The dice player who gambled on sexual intercourses.

You play the dice but do not win, Ultor, and you put nothing at stake

<sup>44</sup> Ar. *Plut.* 242–244: ἦν δ' ὡς παραπλήγ' ἄνθρωπον εἰσελθὼν τύχῳ, / πόρναισι καὶ κύβοις παραβεβλημένος / γυμνὸς θύραζ' ἐξέπεσον ἐν ἀκαρεῖ χρόνου.

<sup>45</sup> Plut. *Proverbia quibus alexandrini usi sunt*, 57: Ταχύτερον ὁ Μάνδρης κρητίνας † ἀπεπέρασε· Ἐφέσιοι κρητίνας ἐκτήσαντο τὰς / Μαγνήτων· ἀπεπέρασε δέ σφιν Μάνδρης ὁ Μανδρολύτου παρ' οἶνον καὶ μέθην καὶ κύβην.

but girls, promising caresses and intercourse at the same time.

Why do you offer to others what you could keep for yourself? Perhaps that the battles on the board please you more? Or the vice you offer brings you gain?

If you win, I do not think you will keep the girl for your own pleasure, but you'll rather sell her.<sup>46</sup>

And finally, Athenaeus reports a terrible series of abuse perpetrated in Rhodes by Hegesilochus, who felt above his fellow citizens:

[...]And they violated a great number of nobly-born women, wives of the first men in the state; and they corrupted no small number of boys and young men; and they carried their profligacy to such a height that they even ventured to play with one another at dice for the free-born women, and they made a bargain which of the nobly-born matrons he who threw the lowest number on knucklebones should bring to the winner for the purpose of being ravished; allowing no exception at all; but the loser was bound to bring her to the place appointed, in whatever way he could, using persuasion, or even force if that was necessary.

And some of the other Rhodians also played at dice in this fashion; but the most frequent and open of all the players in this way was Hegesilochus, who aspired to become the governor of the city."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Luxorius, *Anth. Lat.* 323R: *De aleatore in pretio lenocinii ludente: ludis, nec superas, Ultor, ad aleam, nec quicquam in tabula das, nisi virginem, spondens blanditias et coitus simul. Hoc cur das aliis, quod poteras tibi? An tali malius praemia grata sunt? Aut prodest vitium tale quod impetras? Si vincas, ego te non puto virginem in luxum cupere, sed mage vendere.*

<sup>47</sup> Ath. 10, 63: εἰθ' ἐξῆς λέγων περὶ τῆς ὀλιγαρχίας ἦν κατεστήσατο μετὰ τῶν φίλων ἐπιφέρει· καὶ πολλὰς μὲν γυναῖκας εὐγενεῖς καὶ τῶν πρῶτων ἀνδρῶν ἥσυχναν, οὐκ ὀλίγους δὲ παῖδας καὶ νεανίσκους διέφθειραν· εἰς τοῦτο δὲ προέβησαν ἀσελγείας, ὥστε καὶ κυβεύειν ἤξιωσαν πρὸς ἀλλήλους περὶ τῶν γυναικῶν τῶν ἐλευθέρων καὶ διωμολογοῦντο τοὺς ἐλάττω τοῖς ἀστραγάλοις βάλλοντας ἦντινα χρῆ τῶν πολιτῶν τῷ νικῶντι εἰς συνουσίαν ἀγαγεῖν, οὐδεμίαν ὑπεξαίρουμένοι

### Game, wine, sex and common moral sense

The combination of playing, drinking and sex could also have unpleasant and reprehensible implications. Behaviors like those reported in the previous paragraphs were condemned also in the past and considered as symptoms of a perverted personality.

The moral condemnation of this sequence of vices is attested by several literary sources, both Greek and Latin, of different periods. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC Aeschines accused Timarchus of being morally corrupt since he started to prostitute himself in gambling houses.<sup>48</sup>

The same condemnation of moral vices was also reported by Plautus.<sup>49</sup>

But even if it was part of real life, it is interesting to see how the condemnation of vices became recursive in political speeches in both the Athenian democracy and the Roman republic. In those political systems, based on the public debate, personal habits of public figures could be exposed for political reasons.

Like Aeschines, Sallust point at the immorality of Catiline without directly mentioning the vicious activities (gambling, sex exploitation, drinking), but the body parts involved in them:

For all those shameless, libertine, and profligate characters, who had dissipated their patrimonies by their hand, penis, or stomach.<sup>50</sup>

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πρόφασιν, ἀλλ' ὅπως ἂν ἕκαστος εἴη δυνατὸς πείθων ἢ βιαζόμενος, οὕτω προστάττοντες ἄγειν. καὶ ταύτην τὴν κυβείαν ἔπαιζον μὲν καὶ τῶν ἄλλων Ῥοδίων τινές, ἐπιφανέστατα δὲ καὶ πλειστάκις αὐτὸς ὁ Ἡγησίλοχος ὁ προστατεῖν τῆς πόλεως ἄξιων.

<sup>48</sup> Aeschin. *In Tim.* 54, 58–59.

<sup>49</sup> Plaut. *Bacch.* 65–73.

<sup>50</sup> Sall. *Cat.* 14, 2: *nam quicumque inpudicus adulter ganeo manu uentre pene bona patria lacerauerat...ei Catilinae proximi familiaresque erant.*

In the same years, Cicero seized every occasion to report at the Senate the vices of Anthony and his friends:

But it is the bitterest thing of all that you, O Aulus Hirtius, who have been distinguished by Cæsar's kindness, and who have been left by him in a condition which you yourself marvel at. I cannot indeed deny that Aulus Hirtius was distinguished by Cæsar, but such distinctions are only of value when conferred on virtue and industry. But you, who cannot deny that you also were distinguished by Cæsar, what would you have been if he had not showered so many kindnesses on you? Where would your own good qualities have borne you? Where would your birth have conducted you? You would have spent the whole period of your manhood in brothels, and cookshops, and in gambling and drinking, as you used to do when you were always burying your brains and your beard in the laps of actresses.<sup>51</sup>

And about Anthony himself:

He protected actors, gamblers, and pimps.<sup>52</sup>

You know the insolence of Antonius; you know his friends; you know his whole household. To be slaves to lustful, wanton, debauched, profligate, drunken gamblers, is the extremity of misery combined with the extremity of infamy.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Cic. Phil. 13, 11 (113–119): *acerbissimum vero est te, A. Hirti, ornatum beneficiis Caesaris et talem ab eo relictum qualem ipse miraris. equidem negare non possum a Caesare Hirtium ornatum, sed illa ornamenta in virtute et in industria posita lucent tu vero qui te ab eodem. Caesare ornatum negare non potes, quid esses, si tibi ille non tam multa tribuisset? ecquo te tua virtus provexisset, ecquo genus? in lustris, popinis, alea, vino tempus aetatis omne consumpsisses, ut faciebas, cum in gremiis mimarum mentum mentemque deponeres.*

<sup>52</sup> Cic. Phil. 8, 10: *cavet mimis, aleatoribus, lenonibus*

<sup>53</sup> Cic. Phil. 3, 35: *Nostis insolentiam Antoni, nostis amicos, nostis totam domum. Libidinosus, petulantibus, impuris, impudicis, aleatoribus, ebriis servire, ea summa miseria est summo dedecore coniuncta.*

And when he occupied the abandoned house of Pompey:

Whole storehouses were abandoned to the most worthless of men. Actors seized on this, actresses on that; the house was crowded with gamblers, and full of drunken men; people were drinking all day, and that too in many places; there were added to all this expense (for this fellow was not invariably fortunate) heavy gambling losses. You might see in the cellars of the slaves, couches covered with the most richly embroidered counterpanes of Cnæus Pompeius. Wonder not, then, that all these things were so soon consumed. Such profligacy as that could have devoured not only the patrimony of one individual, however ample it might have been, (as indeed his was,) but whole cities and kingdoms.<sup>54</sup>

### Play to create a safe space

Anthony was clearly a gambler, and his passion for dice was also noticed by Cleopatra. Interpersonal relations are always complex, and after thousands of years it's difficult to say which of those, that ancient historians reported as 'great love stories', were really grounded on a genuine feeling, and which were merely depicted like that by external observers.

However, according to what Plutarch reports about the life of Anthony, it seems that he and Cleopatra established a genuine connection and also had a lot of fun together, playing board games too. The follow-

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<sup>54</sup> Cic. *Phil.* 2, 27, 303–304: *Apothecae totae nequissimis hominibus condonabantur; alia mimi rapiebant, alia mimae; domus erat aleatoribus referta, plena ebriorum; totos dies potabatur, atque id locis pluribus; suggerabantur etiam saepe (non enim semper iste felix) damna aleatoria; conchyliatis Cn. Pompei peristromatis servorum in cellis lectos stratos videres. Quam ob rem desinite mirari haec tam celeriter esse consumpta. Non modo unius patrimonium quamvis amplum, ut illud fuit, sed urbis et regna celeriter tanta nequitia devorare potuisset.*

ing passage of Plutarch's *Life of Anthony* tells the story of two lovers that sometimes must have needed to find relief from the weight of their political life and, despite their public role, wandered in the streets of Alexandria behaving like teenagers in love:

But Cleopatra, distributing her flattery, not into the four forms of which Plato speaks, but into many, and ever contributing some fresh delight and charm to Antony's hours of seriousness or mirth, kept him in constant tutelage, and released him neither night nor day. She played at dice with him, drank with him, hunted with him, and watched him as he exercised himself in arms; and when by night he would station himself at the doors or windows of the common folk and scoff at those within, she would go with him on his round of mad follies, wearing the garb of a serving maiden. For Antony also would try to array himself like a servant.

Therefore he always reaped a harvest of abuse, and often of blows, before coming back home; though most people suspected who he was. However, the Alexandrians took delight in his coarse wit, and joined in his amusements in their graceful and cultivated way; they liked him, and said that he used the tragic mask with the Romans, but the comic mask with them.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Plut. *Ant.* 29, 1–2: ἡ δὲ Κλεοπάτρα τὴν κολακείαν οὐχ, ὥσπερ ὁ Πλάτων φησί, τετραχῇ, πολλαχῇ δὲ διελοῦσα, καὶ σπουδῆς ἀπτομένῳ καὶ παιδιᾷς ἀεί τινα καινὴν ἡδονὴν ἐπιφέρουσα καὶ χάριν, διεπαιδαγωγεῖ τὸν Ἀντώνιον οὔτε νυκτὸς οὔτε ἡμέρας ἀνιῆσα. καὶ γὰρ συνεκύβευε καὶ συνέπινε καὶ συνεθήρρευε καὶ γυμναζόμενον ἐν ὅπλοις ἐθεᾶτο, καὶ νύκτωρ προσισταμένῳ θύραις καὶ θυρίσι δημοτῶν καὶ σκώπτοντι τοὺς ἔνδον συνεπλανᾶτο καὶ συνήλυε θεραπαινίδιου στολὴν λαμβάνουσα καὶ γὰρ ἐκεῖνος οὕτως ἐπειρᾶτο σκευάζειν ἑαυτόν. ὅθεν αἰεὶ σκωμμάτων, πολλάκις δὲ καὶ πληγῶν ἀπολαύσας ἐπανήρχετο: τοῖς δὲ πλείστοις ἦν δι' ὑπονοίας. οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ προσέχαιρον αὐτοῦ τῇ βωμολοχίᾳ καὶ συνέπαιζον οὐκ ἀρρῦθμως οὐδὲ ἀμούσως οἱ Ἀλεξανδρεῖς ἀγαπῶντες καὶ λέγοντες ὡς τῷ τραγικῷ πρὸς τοὺς Ῥωμαίους χρηταὶ προσώπῳ, τῷ δὲ κωμικῷ πρὸς αὐτούς.

Board games were very popular among the legionaries and during the several military campaigns he undertook, Anthony must have had a lot of fun playing with his comrades.<sup>56</sup> Just like him, legionaries had a lot of free time, but were also exposed to risks, threats, and dangers. Life in legionary camps must have also been very stressful because of the strict discipline and it's easy to understand why soldiers took advantage of their free time to play, party, and eventually have some sex or romance. Or perhaps all of that at the same time...

A wooden tablet, found in the legionary camp of Vindonissa and dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, was inscribed on both sides with a message sent by a legionary to a comrade. The message says:

(External side) Keep in mind she that host you at the XII

(Internal side) So you will know where I prepare for the banquet, with various games and great revelries. Tomorrow, beside the most powerful god of games, I'll grab the dice-shaker like a gladium. Dear brother, be well.<sup>57</sup>

We can assume that the XII mentioned in the letter is the civic number of the party's venue, but we don't know if the woman who waited the legionaries was the owner of a tavern or a public house, a private citizen involved in the party, or a prostitute, and the XII was the number of her *cubiculum*.

In any case, at least in the soldier's eyes, it must have been a very relaxing and joyful day with games, wine, food, laughter and eventually some intercourse.

<sup>56</sup> The attitude of Anthony and his fellows towards gambling is reported by different authors, but the one who insisted most on it was Cicero, in his *Philippics*, II, 23, 27, 39, 41; III, 35; VIII, 10; XIII, 11.

<sup>57</sup> 30-101 d.C., Vindonissa Museum, inv. – Nr. V.03.50/0.10. AE 1996, 1133. CEL add. p. 74, Nr. 1. (B). in M.A. SPEIDEL (1996: 188–191): *Im(!) mentem habe / hospitam tuam in / XII / Itaque scias ubi convivium orno / ludos varios quoque ac comisation- / em mundam cras per genios potis- / simos ludi crispo orcam sicut gladi- / um frater care vale / [---] frat[er] care vale*

## Conclusion

In antiquity, connections between games and seduction, dice and sex, knucklebones and love were very complicated and articulate. This paper presented a selection of historical sources to show how deeply they were intertwined on a real and symbolic level, and how varied the outcomes of their combinations could be.

Clearly, these connections evolved along the centuries, but most of this process wasn't reported by ancient authors who weren't really interested in it, maybe except Ovid. What we know about romantic outcomes of ancient gaming practices is derived from accidental quotations occurring in texts whose aims were varied, or by rare archaeological findings. We don't have all the information we would like to have, but the evidence compiled here can however give an idea of how ancient Greeks and Romans used board games to reduce the interpersonal distance and create a safe, relaxed, and comfortable atmosphere among peers.

Reading those texts, we can feel on one hand the distance between us and the ancients, but on the other we can feel them very closely and witness how their interpersonal relations evolved more or less in the same way and towards the same aims as ours. They played and laughed, seduced and loved, enjoying life and mutual company, just as we do, simply according to different cultural habits.

A suitable end for this paper is a sentence written on a roman gaming board found in Timgrad. It expresses the attitude of the ancients towards life and resonates as a reminder for us too. It invites players to hunt each other, eventually in a romantic way, to bath, play and laugh, and it concludes, this means living! *Venari, lavari, ludere, ridere: occest vivere!*<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> CIL VIII 17938. In: FERRUA 1964.

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