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«Board Games» Assemblages from Early Agricultural Settlements in South-Eastern Europe

The article considers the hypothesis that some groups of artefacts (astragalus, «cones» and objects with a system of holes) dating to early agricultural period (Neolithic and Chalcolithic) from the territory of South-Eastern Europe could have been used as equipment for playing ancient «games» or divination practices. The analysis led to several conclusions: 1) the objects from South-Eastern Europe are similar in shape to the artefacts that most researchers consider game equipment (Ancient World, ethnography); 2) these objects appear in agricultural societies, where significant changes in the outlook and self-consciousness of the population could be observed; 3) astragalus, cones and boards with holes appear in the early Neolithic in the Near East and in the SEE region, they could have reached South-Eastern Europe in the process of neolithization; 4) the name «games» for such items can only be used conventionally.

Key words: South-Eastern Europe, «board games», early agriculture cultures.

On the territory of South -Eastern Europe (SEE) archaeologists come across a number of objects dating to the Neolithic and Eneolithic periods, the determination of functioning of which causes difficulties. They are the so-called «astragalus»¹, «tokens», and the objects with holes that are slightly similar to the boards for games [3]. Some researchers believe that they could have been used as sets for the old «board games» [4]. However the authors do not always offer arguments for such claim, neither they consider all of these categories of things together in one complex. On the other hand, there is literature on ancient games

¹ «Astragalus» – the bone in the ankle that articulates with the leg bone to form the ankle joint. This bone of domestic or wild even-toed ungulates (Artiodactyla or hoofed animals) has a specific shape with four different «faces», and when falling on a horizontal surface it lands on one of them. Due to this peculiarity, astragalus has long been used for games or divination purposes being prototype of dice. The best ones were small sheep's or goats' bones [1].

– their origin, evolution, and so on [5]. But most of the «board game» authors are not familiar with the finds from SEE is obviously unknown, as in their works there is little coherent analysis of all the things that could have been used in «games». The focus is on the origin and description of «boards» or surfaces for playing games (wherein there is practically no analysis of «astragalus» or «counters»). On the other hand, there are a number of works dedicated to «cones», «pintaderas», and similar objects under different names, depending on their interpretation [6], but the possible usage of them for game purpose is not considered. This article is an attempt to analyze in more detail the usage of several groups of artefacts from the SEE for playing «board games». It is also proposed to consider the items for board «games» in one complex. So, what do these findings from the territory of SEE represent and what is the area of their distribution?

Astragalus are known from the territory of modern Romania (Bonteshty) and Bulgaria (Madara, Kodja-Dermen), Ukraine (sites Luka Vrublivetska, PolyvanyyYar

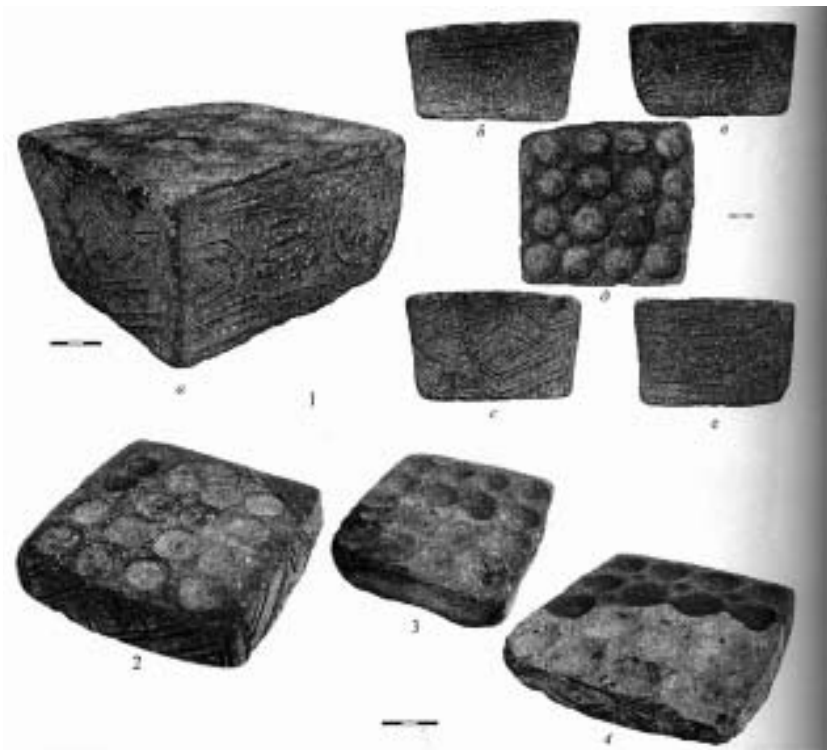


Fig-1 Clay tokens (after Budja 1992).

[7]). Small clay objects (cones, pintaderas etc.) are frequently found everywhere on the territory of SEE (Fig_1), they appeared in the Early Neolithic and, with some interruptions, were used till Late Chalcolithic (Nea Nicomedia, Karanovo I, II, Starčevo, Körös and Criş Cultures, Linear Pottery Culture, Vinca, Cucuten-Tripolitan Culture and others [8]). In addition to counters and astragalus, there is one more category of artefacts from the territory of SEE, the interpretation of which is quite controversial. They are the objects of various sizes and shapes with the system of holes or cells applied on top of them.

Among them is the object of an unusual shape, which was found in 2003 at site Talyanky (Tripolitan Culture [9]). There were two fragments left of it (13 cm and 6.5 cm long, 8 cm wide), the original shape of the object was an oval (Fig_2). The artefact was deformed as a result of secondary firing. On its upper surface there were three rows of rounded holes. The holes were made with a pointed object (0.7 cm in diameter). This finding is not unique in Tripolitan Culture. Some fragments of similar objects were found in the 30-s of the twentieth century at sites Kostisha and Kadievka².

«Objects with dimples» were relatively common findings at Early Chalcolithic sites in the Struma River basin [11]. This category of things is represented by small square boards (with the sides of 10 to 15 cm) with 16 dimples (impressions) located in four rows (Fig_3). These artefacts are quite numerous (75 were found at site Slatino only) and widespread. Except Slatino they are known from Sitahri, Strumsko, Bylgarchevo [12], and possibly Pernik and Kolárovo [13].

As we can see there is a number of items that can be considered (one of the versions) as «game accessories». Before analyzing this hypothesis we should make it clear that the term «game» can be used to refer to such items only conventionally as it does not fully reflect the functionality of them. It should be noted that most of the

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Fig-2 Artefact from Talyanky (Tripolitan Culture).

² In special literature there are different names for them: «cones», «small clay cones», «miniature clay objects (figures)», «conical clay seals on a round base», «bread», «pintaderas», «disk-shaped objects», «balls», «hemispheres», «lenticular discs», «little discs», «buttons», «decorative and other objects», «cylinders», «tokens», «ear studs», «nose plugs», «vessel-vidе objects», «rectangular objects of unknown purpose» [2]. Further in the article they will be conventionally called «cones» and «pintaderas».

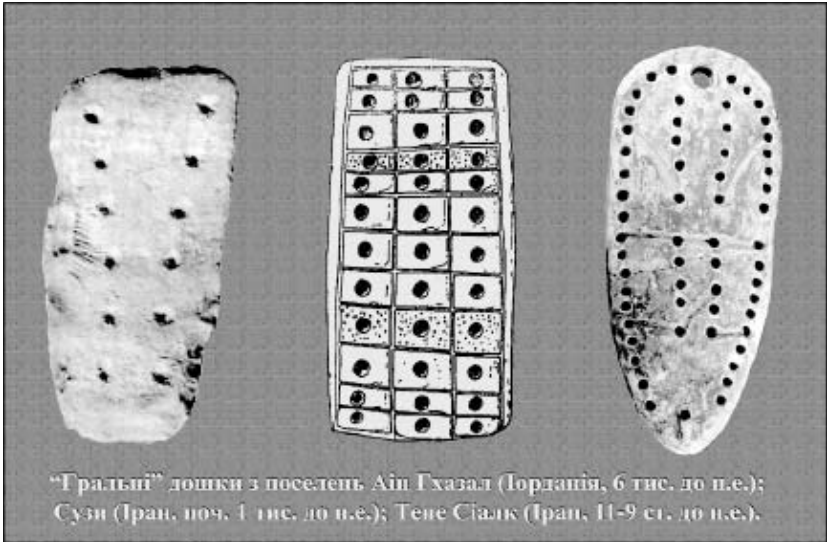


Fig-3 «Objects with dimples» (after Chokadziev 1995).

ancient «games» were linked with predictive and divinatory practices, which some researchers [14] consider to be primary.

Things, that are very similar to the artefacts from SEE, have been known from the Neolithic period. «Cones» appear at the end of the IX millennium BC in Preceramic Neolith in Southwest Anatolia (Çayönü, Hritil, Canhasan), Levant (Ain Ghazal, Jericho, Beisamoun, Beidha, Megiddo) and in Northern Mesopotamia [15].

The first «boards» also date back to Neolith. One of the earliest comes from the site of Ain Ghazali (Jordan, 6th millennium BC) (Fig_4a). Two boards and one fragment were also found in Beidha. Another board was found in the Neolithic layer in the area ChaghaSefid in West Iran [16].

During the Bronze Age the artefacts of this type were common on the territory of Middle East and Egypt (Fig_4, 5). Later board games appear in many civilizations of the Old and New World [17]. Some names of such games have survived – Senet, Go, etc [18]. Not knowing the rules of the game, researchers often call each specific finding in its own way – «game of 58 holes,» «game of 30 squares,» etc., that is, in a conventionally descriptive way [19]. Sometimes the games are called by the place of discovery – «Royal Game of Ur» or by the characteristic feature – «dogs and jackals» [20]. As for the boards for the game, they were different in shape (circle, square, rectangle, bird, frog, scorpion, etc.), made of various material (wood, bone, clay), and the «fields» for counters varied too.

Considering the available artefacts it seems appropriate to distinguish three main types of boards (or surfaces to play a game): 1) with small narrow holes (Fig_4), 2) with large holes that have flat edges (dimples) (Fig_5b), 3) with a flat surface the layout of which is divided into squares (Fig_5a). This differentiation is essential, since the three types need different kinds of «counters». If with the first type boards only one (elongated and thin) chip-like counter can be put into a hole, the second type boards provide for the possibility of filling the holes with several items. For the third type boards the best choice would be «cones» or «hemispheres» with a flat bottom.

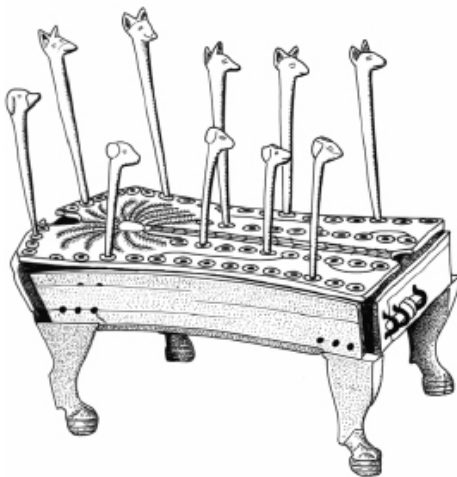


Fig-4a. «Board» from Ain Ghazal (after Rollefson 1992);
 b. Board with 3x12 perforated squares from Susa (after
 Dunn-Vaturi 2009), c. «Game of 58 holes», TepeSialk
 (after Dunn-Vaturi 2010).

In this respect, an object from Iran (Jiroft culture burial [21]) might be of interest, where one can see the process of transformation of narrow holes for chips (type 1) into outlined squares (type 3) (Fig_4b).

Identification of the actual chips or counters during the excavation is quite problematic and difficult. When it comes to the board with small holes, the chips must have been little sticks which often had heads of animals on top (cat, horse, monkey, dog, jackal, etc.) (Fig_6). Such things were found in Egypt [22]. Often they were made of wood which is perishable material (it may explain why they are almost never found in other regions), and less frequently of bone. Bone counters or chips can often be interpreted by archaeologists as pins or toys [23]. For games with large holes, a variety of materials – grains, stones, seeds, etc. was used, according to what we know from ethnographic data [24]. As to the third type boards (with flat surface), people could have used small objects in the shape of cones, hemispheres, etc. to play, and now they are the best represented reaching quite a significant amount (Fig_7).

Regarding ethnographic parallels to similar games, mancala is studied best of all. In the world there are about 280 names of the game, or to be more precise, the mancala group of games [25]. The «boards» of today look very similar to the artefacts of first civilizations. On the board (which can be a proper board or a layout on the ground) a system of wide holes with sloping walls is applied (type 2), and



Игры в Древнем мире.

Fig-5a. «Royal Game of Ur» (after Romain 2000), b. Mankala board from Belgrade Fortress (after Biki and Vukovi 2010).

on the sides there are often holes for counters, the so-called «baskets». A variety of materials (usually the one that is at hand)- grains, sticks, shells, stones, and so on are used as counters [26]. This group of games includes Neolithic artefacts from Jordan, some findings from Egypt and the «boards» incised into the rock from Petra [27]. Of course, this assumption about the artefacts being pieces of games is rather theoretical since the first documented written evidence of mancala relates to medieval times, when it was spread along with Islam [28].

As we can see, the shape of board «game» assemblages is quite different. Therefore, the division into the three types according to the surfaces for playing makes sense. This will make the terminology a little more precise (then the objects with narrow holes can hardly be attributed to the mancala type of games), and facilitate the classification of the material. For example, if you take objects from SEE, they can also be divided into three types – Trypolian «board» can be attributed to type 1, the «objects with dimples» to type 2, and many pieces that could be used on flat surface, to type 3, (or for all other purposes). So this division confirms multivariance, and it lets us assume that such artefacts existed at the same time. And there is something that unites all of these things into one category, for the «game»

**“Игра” на крыше
храма Сети I в Египте.**



“Игральные доски” вырезанные на камне в Петре.

Fig-6 «Palm Tree Game», Thebes, Egypt, (drawing Caroline Florimont, Musée du Louvre)
(after Dunn-Vaturi 2000).

itself requires surface for playing, counters and dices are needed too³. In addition, the holes on the surface are placed not chaotically, but form a system, and they are usually made in a parallel way. These features are common for all board «games», which, according to Van Binsberhen were a widespread phenomenon in the ancient world, and despite their distinctions, were very similar [30].

So these things have common features (characteristics), both between themselves and with the Neolithic objects from SEE. SEE Neolithic «boards» represent a system of holes, «counters» are identical as to their shape too. But to what extent is it correctly to analyze these things in the context of gaming equipment? A similar interpretation for early civilizations items is attested by written sources, as well as by ethnographic analogies described by researchers. The artefacts from Neolithic times are completely «silent», in addition, they are less expressive (especially «Trypolian board»). The fact that these things can be attributed to gaming equipment, remains quite controversial, not all researchers share this statement [31], so their detailed analysis should be carried out. In order not to be tempted to look for game piec-

³ They were interpreted by T.S. Passek as pedestals for figurines [10].



Fig-7 Board with Counters from El Mahasna, Egypt (after Romain 2000).

es in certain collections, it is necessary to understand whether the Neolithic and Eneolithic objects from SEE could potentially have been used for «playing a game».

One of the leading scholars on the origin of board games W. Bisberhen describes three kinds of contexts allowing to identify a particular object as a «gaming» piece [32]. It can be a unique context in which the artefact was found among artefacts contemporary to it, or a repetitive (systematic) context when there are earlier analogies that the scholarly community have agreed to define as game ones (and that are associated with the artefact in question in the space-temporal relation). And, at last, an interpretative context when a specialist has a very detailed knowledge of actual practices (games) or there are textual evidences of artefacts or similar objects.

The author also warns that archaeology and cultural anthropology «discovered games as a fertile topic. Any artefact now risks to be interpreted in ludic terms, just like a generation ago the classification as ‘magic object’ or ‘ritual object’ was so standard that one could wonder how, with all this magic and ritual, people in the past still found the time to produce and consume their food.» [33] If the artefacts do not «fit» in one of Van Binsberhen’s contexts, and we cannot be certain that we are dealing with board games, a more detailed analysis should be carried out. It would be desirable to see how often the objects are found within certain historic period and try to consider their use as gaming equipment.

The number of artefacts of the three categories that are consideration found on the territory of SEE is different. If the counters are rather numerous, the «boards»

are few. The reasons of such a situation may be: 1) poor preservation of archaeological material, 2) a «game» does not necessarily need a specially made board (portable and of certain material like wood, stone, clay etc.), any surface would do, often drawn on the ground⁴, 3) archaeologists often cannot interpret the finds, having no idea about analogues. As a consequence, these things seldom are included into catalogues where they can be seen by a wider scientific community. The number and variety of these things is likely to be more numerous.

The time of existence of these categories is also different. If the «counters» were known from the early Neolithic through the Chalcolithic, «boards» and astragalus are found mainly on Chalcolithic sites. All the three categories of items appear in SEE later than in the Near East. Given that the process of neolithization of SEE, as the number of studies proves, could have taken place with the direct participation of migrants from the Near East [37], then the «gaming objects» could have spread there together with the groups of people. This earlier stuff is likely to have had the same usage as the findings from SEE. To see whether these things could be «gaming» pieces, one shall refer to the origin of board games.

It is almost impossible to follow their origin (time and place), so if we try to come closer to understanding the causes of the origin, it will be easier to understand when it happened as well. For that matter, there are several points of view. The first one is that games originated from purely entertainment purpose, i.e., as a form of entertainment. The second one is that the modern game is a relic of primitive divination.

The first concept was most widely introduced by H. Murray, who is considered to be a classic historian on the origin of games, and dedicated his work to collect information about games on different continents beginning from ancient times; he also worked out their classification and bibliography [38]. He believed that games come into being as the result of the availability of free time. Also H. Murray argued that there was no connection between games and divination practice.

Another games historian, whose views were quite opposite, was an American anthropologist S. Culin, who studied game practices of American tribes north of Mexico. He was convinced that the origin of games should be looked for in the divination practices. Comparing the games in the «civilized» societies and in the «barbaric» ones, he came to the conclusion that in spite of similarities between them, there was a fundamental difference: «civilized» people play for fun and to fill the spare time, and «barbarians» – for telling fortune and holding sacred action. As one of the examples to support his views he considered cards, which are still used for divination. S. Culin therefore did not link the emergence of games with a conscious invention, but argued that they were a relic of ancient times and survival conditions when they were practiced in magical rites, mainly as a means of divination. These

⁴ In most cases, the entire «game» set is not found at one site [29].

«games», being based on certain fundamental concepts of the Universe, were characterized by certain uniformity as well. [39]

In the late 20th century Van Binsberher debated H. Murray's views in his book where he gives numerous parallels between board games and geomancy (divination on the ground). The author suggests looking for the emergence of board games in the Neolithic, and not earlier [40].

With the transition to agriculture ancient people underwent tremendous changes in their lifestyle. There were changes in the self-consciousness of people itself. In the course of the process of the development of agricultural system, the concepts of space and time became more significant, and a kind of redefinition of these concepts by man can be observed [41].

While domesticating plants and animals, people began to change the nature to fit their needs. During this process a particular part of the environmental space had to be delimited (where the activities of other people or communities did not expand). This was necessary in order to go in for farming, and to define the ownership of both the land and the harvest. This space or properly speaking «field» had, in turn, its internal division as well [42].

As for the concept of time, seasonality, which had already been known to Palaeolithic hunters / gatherers, became very important in the Neolithic. Being dependent on changes in annual cycles, a farmer had to pre-plan works on his field, sowing and harvesting during the periods which were the most appropriate (i.e. in this case one can see calculated expectations aimed at farmer's timely actions aimed at soil preparation, planting, weeding and harvesting in designated time, etc.).

It was exactly this analysis of formal manipulation with space and time that allowed Van Binsbergen to make assumptions about the origin of both geomancy and board games in the Neolithic. Describing specific imagery of mancala and geomancy, he draws attention to the fact that it was primarily observed during the Neolithic in the context of animal husbandry, farming, hunting, proto-astronomy and cult of earth [43].

Both in game, and geomancy the relations between man and his natural environment, as well as between man and his social environment (together with their confrontation and competition) were schematized and transferred to the board for «playing», where there were established rules, partners, enemies or witches [44]. They were represented by material objects (chips or counters), often anthropomorphic ones, that moved about in the replacement in time and space – usually by interacting with other individuals represented in the same way.

The fundamental scheme on the surface for playing mancala is a series of several parallel lines, often drawn on the ground, with a number of holes made along

each line. This net-like scheme, which was typical for mancala («go» and other board games), as well as for geomancy, apparently resembles delimited fields [45].

For carrying out farming works successfully, some form of social organization was to be developed, with an established system of rules and values[46]. This system of regulating relations through rules («rules of game») penetrates into all aspects of social behaviour of any human culture – ritual, language, art, family, public relations, etc. One of the main features of board «games» is also the existence of rules and development strategies. Statistical cross-cultural comparisons showed that strategy games such as mancala are usually characteristic of societies with a certain level of complexity. Simpson and Van Binsbergen believe that there is some connection between the formal rules of games and more complex communities arising in the course of Neolithization [47].

Finally VanBinsberhen suggests that there may have been a parallel rather than sequential development of geomancy and mancala games and that both activities originated from the same things and probably developed side by side using the same tools against a background of Neolithic changes [48].

To confirm the arguments on the Neolithic (agricultural) context of the origin of board games, researchers turn to ethnographic sources and, above all, to the data about mancala family of games because they 1) may be among the most archaic games that have survived, 2) still are extremely popular, particularly among the relatively «isolated» from the «globalized world» nations.

Agricultural symbolism of mancala is recorded primarily in the vocabulary used while playing the «game.» In all versions of the game throughout its distribution area, one move is usually called a «sowing», while players can get into the so-called «hunger» (which happens when all the holes of one player are empty). Some versions of the name of the game can be translated as «magical sowing». The holes on the board or made on the ground are often called «houses» [49], «fields» [50] or «animal kraals» (enclosures).

The observations also revealed a number of limitations associated with the game. So, in traditional communities not everyone and not always was allowed to play mancala. Playing the game was often limited on the basis of not only gender, age and status, but also in space and time. For some areas of Africa mancala was mainly played by adult males. Women, in general, were not allowed to play [51]. In Asia, the situation was somewhat different: in India [52] and the Maldives there are some variations of mancala which are played only by women and children [53], and on the island Java only by young girls of noble origin.

Mancala is usually associated with celebrations, ceremonies and rituals. In many tribes the best time for playing the game of mancala is a funeral, a wedding, or iso-

lation period, which precedes the initiation of boys [54]. Of interest is the connection between the game and funeral ceremony. In Indonesia, taboos were imposed on playing mancala in all cases, except for the period of mourning after the death of someone's dear during wake period and ceremonies associated with burials [55], etc. Mancala is also often played in order to call for rain or stimulate growth of vegetation, so the best time for playing is during a drought but during rainy season it was forbidden to use seed counters [56].

Another important feature of both mancala and geomancy is dualism. They are characterized not only by the existence of formal rules, but also by the fact that these rules are saturated with fundamental structural topics (e.g., such main opposites as even / odd, male / female, life / death, white / black) that are essential for the rich pattern and dynamics of the session (in geomancy or game). [57]

As we can see, ethnographic sources confirm deep sacralisation of games such as mancala, their important social role and their relationship with geomancy.

The analysis of the context of origin of board games confirms the potential probability of the existence of such artefacts in early agricultural cultures on the territory of SEE. Therefore, the interpretation of several groups of artefacts from the region as ancient games equipment has the right to exist. In particular this concerns astragalus and «boards». As for «cones» and «pintaderas», the question is much more difficult and is to be discussed later.

Modern authors practically do not examine their probable relationship with the ancient games⁵. Among the speculations on their usage one of the most popular is the hypothesis that they were used as counting objects for different categories of things (grain, textiles, etc.) [59]. It should be noted that this concept is based on the material from Precivilization period in Mesopotamia. The question whether Neolithic economy needed a complex system of counting remains open. In order to consider «cones» and «pintaderas» only in this way, we need additional reasoning. On the other hand, these small objects could have been multifunctional [60]. The shape of «counters» for board games in the ancient world is identical to «cones» and «hemispheres» (Fig. 7) [61]. For better understanding of these small finds from the SEE we should not exclude the possibility of their use (or some of them) as some of the items for playing games.

At first glance the categories of objects considered in the paper are rather «ambiguous» artefacts that cannot be attributed easily but actually they open up opportunities for exploring early agricultural communities from the territories of SEE. In the first place, researchers looking at these things as gaming pieces, try

⁵ They are seen as seals for applying paint on the body, dishes, textile or even to decorate bread, or seals used for concluding contracts of exchange, etc [58].

to understand the people who might have used them. V. Markevitch investigated «games in Tripolitan culture» to understand the level of players' intelligence, he came to the conclusion that the process of playing games required skills of analytical thinking, ability to count and good proficiency [62]. S. Chohadzhev believes that «objects with dimples» were used for playing games for entertainment, and this, in turn, according to the author, can be an indicator of the availability of certain amount of free time, and may also indicate «heterogeneous social structure, which was formed in the early Chalcolithic» [63]. However, if we do not adhere to the position that the appearance of these objects had purely entertainment reasons, the reconstruction could be somewhat different.

Secondly, the artefacts from SEE discussed in this paper, could be an important argument in working out various models of both Neolithization process and Chalcolithic origin. Some researchers consider «cones» and «pintaderas» as one of the components of «Neolithic package» [64] and analyzing the chronology of layers with similar findings, try to trace possible routes of movement in the region [65]. Thus, for C. Perles «stamps» and «ear plugs» is an argument (among others) in favour of «colonization process by small pioneer groups» [66]. The migrants consisted of people from different settlements, as evidenced by the findings of «cones» in Greece which probably originated from various parts of Near East. Thus the «cones» are actively involved in solving various aspects of history of SEE during early agricultural period.

Finally, astragalus, «counters» and boards from SEE having analogues with earlier finds from the Middle East add new data to the general history of board games (or to the development of such objects, if they were not «games»). Unfortunately, these findings are still not «included» in general «database» neither in the «game» block of literature nor in the «pintaderas» one.

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Шатило Л.О. Комплекс артефактів для проведення «площинних ігор» з ранньоземлеробських поселень Південно-Східної Європи

У статті розглядається гіпотеза, згідно якої деякі групи артефактів (астрагали, «конуси» та предмети з системою лунок) ранньоземлеробського часу (неоліт та енеоліт) з території Південно-Східної Європи могли використовуватися в якості інвентарю для проведення давніх «ігор» або вішувальних практик. Аналіз цієї версії дозволив зробити декілька висновків: 1) предмети з ПСС по формі аналогічні артефактам, які більшість дослідників вважає предметами для гри (Стародавній світ, етнографія); 2) подібні предмети з'являються в землеробських культурах, де відбулися суттєві зміни у світогляді населення; 3) астрагали, конуси та дошки з системою лунок з'являються в ранньому неоліті на Близькому Сході і в регіон ПСС вони могли потрапити в процесі неолітизації; 4) назва «ігри» для подібних предметів може бути виключно умовною.

Ключові слова: Південно-Східна Європа, «площинні ігри», ранньоземлеробські культури.

Шатило Л.А. Комплекс артефактов для проведения «плоскостных игр» с раннеземледельческих поселений Юго-Восточной Европы

В статье рассматривается гипотеза, согласно которой некоторые группы артефактов (астрагалы, «конусы» и предметы с системой отверстий) раннеземледельческого периода (неолит и энеолит) с территории Юго-Восточной Европы могли использоваться в качестве инвентаря для проведения древних «игр» или гадательных практик. Анализ этой версии позволил сделать несколько выводов: 1) предметы из Юго-Восточной Европы по форме аналогичны артефактам, которые большинство исследователей считает предметами для игры (Древний мир, этнография); 2) подобные предметы появляются в земледельческих культурах, где произошли существенные изменения в мировоззрении населения; 3) астрагалы, конусы и доски с системой отверстий появляются в раннем неолите на Ближнем Востоке, и в регион Юго-Восточной Европы они могли попасть в процессе неолитизации; 4) название «игры» для подобных предметов может быть исключительно условным.

Ключевые слова: Юго-Восточная Европа, «плоскостные игры», раннеземледельческие культуры.

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