ASEB
### THE GAME OF TWENTY SQUARES

An Ancient Egyptian Two-Player Board Game

By Daniel U. Thibault

INTRODUCTION

Aseb, 'The Twenty Squares game' (frequently misidentified as Tjau, 'The Game of Thieves' or 'The Game of Robbers') was played from 3000 B.C. until 400 A.D. and is one of the oldest known games. Aseb is an example of a game that seems to have 'invaded' Egypt from the outside and is certainly closely related to the Sumerian 'Royal Game of Ur' (and a possible Cretan relative known as the Knossos Game); it is believed to have been brought to Egypt from Mesopotamia by the Hyksos. This is an excellent game, enjoyable and interesting to play. It was frequently put on the back side of Senet boards, and eventually combined boards were created. Further down the line, the merger of Aseb and Senet would lead to Backgammon.
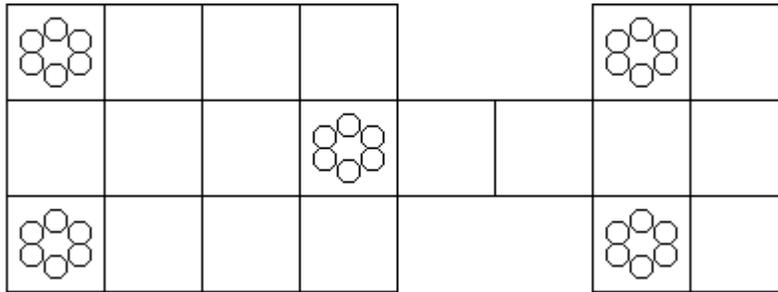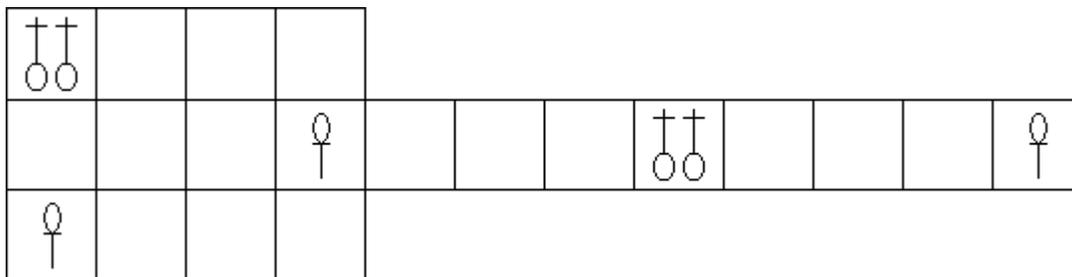

An Ur board; the Aseb board simply unfolds the rightmost squares into a straight tail

COMPONENTS

Board

The Aseb board consists of three rows of four squares, the middle row extending a further eight squares out:

Throwing Sticks or Knucklebones

The players use Senet throwing sticks or knucklebones as randomising devices. In a pinch, an ordinary die will do. On a throw of 6, you get to move and throw again. Alternately, use the Senet method: a throw other than a 2 or a 3 means you move and throw again.

Pieces

Each player has five pieces; spindles and cones, like in Senet. It is possible earlier versions of the game had seven pieces per player, like the Ur game.

SET-UP

The pieces begin the game "off-board", in the long spaces on either side of the board's stem.

OBJECT OF THE GAME

The object is to be the first player to bear off all 5 of his pieces, by landing them precisely on the last square. Once successfully borne off, a piece plays no further part in the game.

PLAYER TURNS

The players throw once each alternately, and move a single piece by the appropriate number of positions. A move *must* be made, and made in full. If no move is possible, then the turn is forfeit (passes to the other player). When forfeiting a throw, the opponent has the option of adding the forfeited throw to his own.

HOW TO MOVE THE PIECES

Each player enters the pieces onto the board from his reserve and moves them as follows:
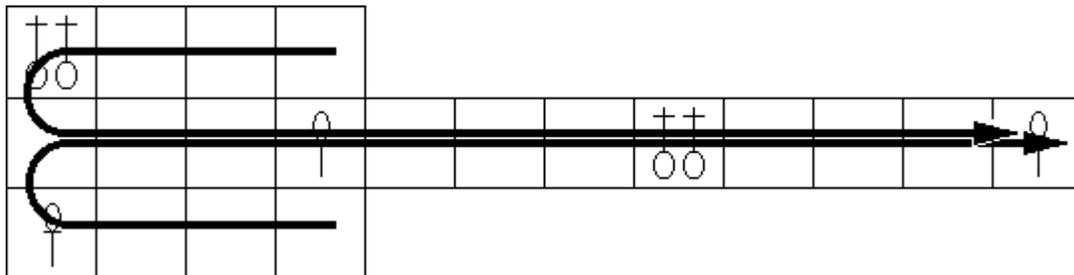
Pieces move forward only. As pieces reach the last square (by exact throw), they bear off; be the first to bear off all your pieces and you win! The marked squares give you an extra turn; when you land on them, you get to throw the sticks and go again. Only one piece may occupy any given square; if you land on an opposing piece, it is removed —sent back to the player's reserve.

To bring your first piece on, you must first throw a 4 or a 6; when that happens, you throw again and move the piece in by that amount. The remaining pieces can be brought in on any throw. Waiting for that initial throw of 4 or 6, particularly while the opponent is already moving, can be quite frustrating, so it is an acceptable variant to forego that rule entirely.

ALTERNATIVE RULES

Since Aseb is very likely evolved from the Ur game, these two variants are plausible (which bring it's play closer to the Ur game's).

FIRST VARIANT:
- More than one piece may occupy the same special square.
- The special squares are safe squares: you cannot be bumped off while there. Pieces of both players can share the space.
- When you land on a special square, you must, if you can, move any one of your pieces ahead 5 squares, ignoring the penalty for passing a special square (see below). If that piece happens to also land on a special square, you get another free move, and so on. If you cannot use the free move, you lose your turn.
- When you pass over a special square, your turn ends and your opponent gets a free move as if *he* had landed on a special square.

SECOND VARIANT:
- More than one piece may occupy the same square —*any* square.
- Two or more of your pieces on a single (non-special) square are safe from attack and cannot be joined by an opposing piece —they effectively form a block. Further, any opposing piece that "attacks" them is bumped off!
- It may now happen that your only legal move is to "attack" a block with one of your pieces. Too bad! Your piece gets bumped off and your turn ends.
- Optionally, you may move groups of pieces (that start on the same square) as if they were a single piece. In this case, groups of two or more pieces are *not* safe from attack (except when on a special square) and *all* are bumped off when attacked!