Gaming Set

1 Material Analysis (Materials and Techniques, Provenance and Parallels)

Various ivory fragments were identified as being parts of toilet boxes or dice containers, dice, and gaming pieces. A few fragments of bone intarsia were most probably parts of a game board. It is uncertain if an ivory plaque and wood remnants were parts of a gaming set.

1.1 Ivory Containers

All the fragments of ivory containers are small in diameter and they feature external decoration consisting of incised lines and dotted circles. Four ivory fragments form one cylindrical container [Fig. 7.1: Z4/8.3, Z4/8.19, Z4/54]. Its rim is rebated to receive a lid, and there is a recess inside to take the base. The cylinder measures 26 mm in diameter. Its interior is smoothly finished, while the exterior surface is decorated with four alternating panels. Two of them consist of rows of four incised parallel lines, with three rows at the top and four at the bottom. These bands alternate with rows of dot-in-circle motifs, three and two respectively. The other two panels are decorated with pairs of semicircles with a cluster of three dotted circles at their ends.

Another fragment (Z4/8.4) [see Fig. 7.1] was part of a cylindrical container with rebated edges to receive a lid and base. It measures 25 mm in diameter and about 45 mm in height. The exterior surface is decorated with rows of incised parallel lines alternating with two rows of dot-in-circle motifs. The main panel is decorated with dotted circles which form a swastika meander.

Z4/207 and Z4/221 are most probably fragments of the same object [Fig. 7.2]. The diameter of the top is 25 mm. They form a container with a recess on the inside at either end: one for a lid and the other for the base. Tiny traces of blue-green and red paste can be discerned in the incised lines and dotted circles. Bone plaques with coloured geometric patterns have been found in Alexandria (Rodziewicz 2007, 55–56, Cat. Nos 82, 83, 87).

A fragment of a cylindrical container (Z4/211.1) [Fig. 7.2] has its exterior surface decorated with linear bands alternating with dotted circles in a row. Except for the widest band, which is decorated with quadruple dot-in-circle motifs arranged in a checkerboard pattern, the other bands consist of dot-in-circle motifs arranged either in simple rows or in the form of a garland.

Another small fragment (Z4/211.2) [see Fig. 7.2] originates from a cylindrical container with one edge rebated, probably to receive a lid. The exterior surface is decorated with three incised bands consisting of three and four lines. A row of dotted circles lies between the first and the second linear band. A wide band of dotted circles in triangular arrangements is placed between the second and the third linear band.

One other fragment (Z4/106) [see Fig. 7.2] also belongs to a cylindrical container. The exterior surface is decorated with a band of four parallel lines between two bands of dotted circles.

The small diameter of the El-Zuma remains would point to their use as toilet boxes: kohl tubes, ointment containers or pyxides for necklace (Boussac 2019, 179, Cat. 108, 3rd–2nd century BC). The round pyxides may have also served as dice boxes (Rodziewicz 2007). Ivory kohl tubes and a vessel have been identified at Gabati (Edwards 1998, 126–127, Fig. 5.11 = 2004, Cat. 177, Fig. 5.12, object 8309) and at Qasr Ibrim cemetery 123 (Mills 1982, object 123.22.15), but they lack the incised decoration. A few ivory and wood kohl flasks and remains of ivory ointment containers were found at the Qustul cemeteries (Emery and Kirwan 1938, 342–343, Pl. 86; Williams 1991, Fig. 154b). They also lack any decoration in the form of dotted circles or they are figural in shape and do not match the El-Zuma fragments. Bone fragments decorated with incised lines and dotted circles were excavated in Kharga Oasis, where they were dated to the 4th–7th centuries AD (MET X.606.2a–x). Decoration consisting of incised lines and dotted circles can also be observed on an elongated fragment of a wooden vessel found in Wadi Qitna (P 3004) and another unidentified object (P 3005) (Strouhal 1984, 237–238, Fig. 155). An ivory kohl tube, similar in shape and with similar decoration to Z4/207 and Z4/221, is presently on display at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum (BAAM Serial 0907; showcase 24; Inv. Coptic Museum 1077). It measures 12.5 cm in height and is dated to the Byzantine period (AD 395–641).

1.2 Dice

Part of a bone die showing a “five”, marked with dotted double circles, was found in T.4 (Z4/108) [Fig. 7.3]. The fragment measures 15.5 mm in length. Various bone fragments, including one with a dotted circle incision (Z4/180) [see Fig. 7.3], might also belong to another die. They mea-

FIGURE 7.1 Ivory containers
PHOTOS BY A. KAMROWSKI, PLATE BY J. THEN-OBŁUSKA

FIGURE 7.2 Ivory containers

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sure about 15 mm in length. Bone/ivory dice were found throughout the late Roman Mediterranean world (e.g. Rodziewicz 2007, Cat. 558, Alexandria; Davidson 1952, Pl. 100, No. 1745, Corinth). Similar dice of bone and ivory can be traced to Nobadian sites in Lower Nubia, examples having been found in a single mound burial at Faras East (Säve-Söderbergh 1981, 68, object 19/1:13, Pl. 95:3, 12 × 14 × 16 mm, AD 500–600) and at Site 2 in Gamai East (Donner 1998, 282, Pl. 209:3, object 154A:4, 10.6 × 9.6 × 8 mm); they also accompanied the Qustul gaming board and pieces mentioned above (Emery and Kirwan 1938: Pl. 87F).

1.3 Gaming Pieces

Half of a large gaming piece made of ivory was found in El-Zuma T.7 (Z7/83) [Fig. 7.4]. It measures about 40 mm in diameter and 40 mm in height. It is possible that Z4/53, Z4/190, Z7/82, and Z7/84 are fragments of gaming pieces [see Figs 7.3, 7.4].

A leather bag with similar ivory gaming pieces was found beneath the board in the said Qustul tomb Q.3 (Emery and Kirwan 1938, 345, Pls 87B,C,D,F). It contained a set of 15 analogous white ivory gaming pieces together with 15 black wooden pieces, five dice and the remains of a *fritillus* (dice box) (Emery and Kirwan 1938, 345, Pl. 9F, 87C. A:Q.3–96). Furthermore, two ivory gaming pieces were found by the Finnish Expedition together with a bone die in grave 154 at Gamai Site 2. One is sub-cylindrical with the top decorated with concentric circles (22 mm in height and 20–25 mm in diameter) (Donner 1998, 282, Object 2/154A:11). The second item, Object 2/154A:15, is similar in shape and size to the El-Zuma and Qustul pieces and measures 50 × 45 × 45 mm (Donner 1998, 282, Pl. 201:4).

FIGURE 7.3 Gaming pieces

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1.4 Intarsia

Five fragments of ivory intarsia were found in El-Zuma in T.7. They are floral-shaped but without any incised decoration. The fragments, 1.8 mm to 2 mm thick, form a pattern [Figs 7.5: Z7/66, 7.6:B] that to some extent resembles an ivory vegetal motif that was set in the central panel of a wooden gaming board found at Qustul in tomb Q.3 [Fig. 7.6:A]. The board was found in the mound above Tomb 3 (Emery 1932, Pl. III, bottom; Emery and Kirwan 1938, 345, Pl. 87A, Q.3–95, Cat. No. 742; currently in the Nubian Museum, Aswan), and it was decorated with three rows of 12 squares of a floral design. Each line is divided by centrepieces, in the form of a circle and two semi-circles with small bolted rings inside, into groups of six. The gam-

ing board measures 77.5 cm by 37 cm, which means that the central panels would be about 8.5 cm in diameter, while the decorative fragments, analogously to the El-Zuma ones, would be about 1 cm wide. Thus, in terms of their size, the El-Zuma remains correspond to the Qustul board decoration.

The Qustul game board was found in a royal tomb dated to about AD 380 (Török 1986, 197). Bell (1979, 28–29) suggested that the board has the same layout as a *duo-decim scripta*, for which there was apparently a preference in the early Roman period, replaced later by a variant called a *tabula* (Bell 1979, 31). In Nubia, remains of *duo-decim scripta* game boards, gaming pieces and dice were found in two Meroitic graves from the 1st century AD at

FIGURE 7.4 Gaming pieces

PHOTOS BY Z. KOWARSKA, PLATE BY J. THEN-OBŁUSKA

FIGURE 7.5 Intarsia

PHOTOS BY A. KAMROWSKI—Z4/257, Z. KOWARSKA—Z7/66,
 PLATE BY J. THEN-OBŁUSKA

Sedeinga (Crist, Dunn-Vaturi, and de Voogt 2016, 136; de Voogt, Francigny, and Baas 2017 and references). However, their inlays lack the sophisticated decoration of the boards found at Qustul. According to László Török (1988, 102), the decorative ivory inlays of the Qustul board imitate *opus interrasile* jewels, suggesting that the game board was made sometime in the last few decades of the 4th century AD. In the history of Roman games, the El-Zuma fragments would constitute the southernmost example of a *duodecim scripta* board found in a grave context, which is dated between the mid-5th and mid-6th century AD. Another fragment of intarsia was found in El-Zuma in T.4 [Fig. 7.5: Z4/257].

1.5 Ivory Plaque

An ivory plaque, Z13/36 [Fig. 7.7], was found in T.13, but its function remains uncertain.

1.6 Wood Fragments

Wood fragments Z4/206 [Fig. 7.8] might have been remnants of a wooden box. One fragment features a lozenge pattern on one side and a rectangular depression on the other side.

1.7 Perforated Pottery Disc

Pottery disc Z5/20 features two holes [Fig. 7.9] and measures 33–35 mm in diameter and 6 mm in thickness. It might have been a game token. Similar specimens are known from Abu Geili (Crawford and Addison 1951, 99, Pl. LII B).

2 Catalogue [Table 7.1]

The catalogue, in tabular form, presents the gaming set according to find number. Object descriptions list (in sequence): figure number, find number (tumulus and object number), object type, material, quantity, form, colour, find context, excavation season, references. The scale is 10 mm, unless otherwise stated.

FIGURE 7.6 Intarsia patterns: A—pattern on a gaming board from Qustul, not to scale; B—reconstruction of various intarsia patterns, not to scale
DRAWING BY M. MOMOT

FIGURE 7.7 Ivory plaque

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FIGURE 7.8 Wood fragments

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FIGURE 7.9
Perforated pottery disc

PHOTO BY K. KOTLEWSKI, PLATE BY J. THEN-OBŁUSKA

TABLE 7.1 Catalogue of the gaming set

Figure no.	Tumulus no.	Find no.	Object	Material	Quantity	Form	Context data	Season	References
7.1	T.4	Z4/8.3	Container	Ivory	1 fragment, fits with Z4/8.19 and Z4/54	decorated fragment	Tunnel		Then-Obłuska 2017, Fig. 11
7.1	T.4	Z4/8.4	Container	Ivory	1 fragment	decorated fragment	Tunnel		Then-Obłuska 2017, Fig. 11
7.1	T.4	Z4/8.19	Container	Ivory	1 fragment, fits with Z4/8.3 and Z4/54	decorated fragment	Tunnel		Then-Obłuska 2017, Fig. 11
7.3	T.4	Z4/53	Gaming pieces	Ivory	1 in fragments		W tunnel, fill, 2.90–4.25 m from edge of shaft, layer 5		
7.1	T.4	Z4/54	Container	Ivory	2 fragments; 1 fits with Z4/8.3 and Z4/8.19	decorated fragment	W tunnel, fill, 2.90–3.40 m from edge of shaft, layer 5	2017	Then-Obłuska 2017, Fig. 11
7.2	T.4	Z4/106	Container	Ivory	2 fragments, joined together	fragments of decorated object	W tunnel, fill, W side, 8.50 m from edge of shaft	2017	Then-Obłuska 2017, Fig. 12
7.3	T.4	Z4/108	Dice	Bone	1	decorated fragment	W tunnel, fill, W side, 2.90–3.40 m from edge of shaft, layer 5	2017	Then-Obłuska 2017, Fig. 13
7.3	T.4	Z4/180	Dice	Ivory	many fragments	decorated	W tunnel, fill, 2.90–4.25 m from edge of shaft, layer 5		
7.3	T.4	Z4/190	Gaming pieces	Ivory	many fragments		E tunnel, fill, between pillars 11 and 111		
7.8	T.4	Z4/206	Container box?	Wood	a few fragments		E tunnel, 2.50 m from the N end, bottom layer	2017	
7.2	T.4	Z4/207	Container	Ivory	3	decorated bone fragments	E tunnel, S part, bottom layer	2017	Then-Obłuska 2017, Fig. 12
7.2	T.4	Z4/211.1	Container	Ivory		decorated bone fragments	E tunnel, S part, dark layer	2017	Then-Obłuska 2017, Fig. 12
7.2	T.4	Z4/211.2	Container	Ivory		decorated bone fragments	E tunnel, S part, dark layer	2017	Then-Obłuska 2017, Fig. 12
7.2	T.4	Z4/221	Container	Ivory	2	decorated fragments, fits with Z4/54?, probably ivory	E tunnel, S part	2017	Then-Obłuska 2017, Fig. 12
7.5	T.4	Z4/257	Intarsia?	Ivory	1	fragment of decorated object	W tunnel, fill, W side, 2.90–3.40 m from edge of shaft, layer 5	2017	
7.9	T.5	Z5/20	Token?	Pottery	1		Tunnel, fill	2007	
7.5, 7.6	T.7	Z7/66	Intarsia	Ivory	6 fragments		Tunnel; Context 5	2015	Then-Obłuska 2017, Fig. 13
7.4	T.7	Z7/82	Gaming pieces	Ivory	4		Tunnel; Context 5	2015	Then-Obłuska 2017, Fig. 13
7.4	T.7	Z7/83	Gaming piece	Ivory	1		Tunnel; Context 8	2015	Then-Obłuska 2017, Fig. 13
7.4	T.7	Z7/84	Gaming piece?	Ivory	1?		Tunnel; Context 10	2015	
7.7	T.13	Z13/36	Plaque	Ivory	1		“found with animal bones”	2009	