3 On the Rules for the Royal Game of Ur

Irving L. Finkel

In Babylon, on 3 November, 177–176 BC, the Babylonian scribe Itti-Marduk-balatu completed the careful writing of a most unusual cuneiform tablet that included a grid on one side and a column of closely-written text on the other, adding his name and the date at the end of the inscription. Itti-Marduk-balatu was a highly-trained member of a distinguished scribal family who were descended from the scholar scribe Mušib. For six generations his forbears had been concerned with esoteric cuneiform texts on astronomy and other learned matters. Itti-Marduk-balatu copied the inscription from a tablet that had belonged to, if it was not written by, a scholar from a different family, called Iddin-Bêl. In time this particular tablet, like countless others, came to be buried in the ruins of Babylon, where it lay until local inhabitants turned it up around AD 1880. Shortly afterwards the tablet arrived in the British Museum, where it was purchased together with one other tablet from a dealer, who offered it on account of its distinctive and unexpected appearance. The tablet was numbered Rm III, 6B, although it is now known as BM 33333B, and is referred to in this article as BM. A description was published shortly thereafter by T. G. Pinches, one of the assistants in the department, who could read cuneiform script (see Fig. 3.2):

Tomb of unbaked clay, inscribed on the obverse with characters within lozenge-shapes, referring, apparently, to certain stars, and inscribed on the reverse with omens from the flight of birds: the summatum, or swallow, and the adad, or raven, being mentioned. The text bears the name of Siduku, or Seleucus, and was therefore written during the Seleucid era. Size, 4 in by 3½ in. Pinches 1886: 71, no. 33

Little attention was paid to this most unusual clay manuscript for many years thereafter. The Assyriologists F. L. Peiser and A. L. Oppenheim visited the museum independently, and each apparently copied the inscription. Oppenheim is known to have prepared a transliteration of the text but neither scholar published the results of his work. Nothing further occurred until 1956, when E. F. Weidner published a photograph of the grid side of the tablet and edited part of the text, using his collected evidence, in an article entitled ‘Ein Lobsuch in Keilschrift aus der Seleukidenzeit’ (Weidner 1956: 175–80, 182–3), in which he argued that the inscription concerned a form of fortune-telling by lots. By a strange chance a second tablet containing partly identical material was published by the Assyriologist J. Bottéro in the very same volume, under the title ‘Deux Curiosités Assyrologiques (avec une note de Pierre Hamelin)’ (Bottéro 1956: 16–25, 36–38). This document had formerly been in the private collection of Count Aymar de Liedekerke-Beaufort, but suffered a disastrous fate. The tablet was handed to a photographer shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, during which the photographer’s studio, and the tablet, were destroyed, although the photograph that he had prepared somehow survived. It was this photograph that was copied and published by Professor Bottéro, who has generously made it available to the present writer for republication here. The Count’s tablet carries no date, but judging from its Neo-Babylonian script, it is several centuries earlier than the Seleucid tablet BM, which itself stands at the end of a chain of scribal transmission. It is possible, although not certain, that this second document came from the southern Mesopotamian city of Uruk. This tablet will be referred to in this article as DLB.

In an important study published four years later that clarified the cuneiform expressions for play and games, B. Landsberger discussed the terminology in the published evidence, also quoting from Oppenheim’s notes, and it was he who demonstrated that these two tablets must be concerned with a game (Landsberger 1966: 122–3; 127–9).

In fact, both scholars were correct. As will be argued here, the tablet BM gives the rules for a board game which is to be identified as employing the later version of the board game.

Sumerian was the first language to be written in cuneiform, and its influence on cuneiform writing persisted for centuries after the language itself was no longer spoken. In the method characteristic of cuneiform texts, Babylonian words can be spelt out phonetically (and unambiguously), but can also be written in a form of shorthand whereby the word is conveyed by a Sumerian ideogram. Scribes could write a Sumerian word within an Akkadian text, and the reader would supply the Akkadian equivalent as he read, much as ‘£5’ is automatically interpreted as ‘five pounds’ by a modern reader, even though the sign ‘£’ contains no hint of the word’s phonetic value. Usually this phenomenon presents no problem to Assyriologists, but sometimes a particular Akkadian equivalent is not known for certain. This situation has a bearing on the text of the rules studied in this article.

1 This script is probably the oldest form of writing known. Cuneiform signs, which came to be impressed into moist clay with a cut reed sometime after 3000 BC, were originally purely pictographic, and represented words, ideas and, ultimately, sounds by means of childlike stylised drawings. The script evolved to the extent that true language could be expressed by a mixture of syllabic signs (e.g. ‘ba’), ideograms expressing one word (e.g. sun) and determinatives (e.g. —). In Mesopotamia proper it was used to write both Sumerian and Akkadian, the latter a branch of Semitic (related to Arabic and Hebrew), in its two dialects of Assyrian and Babylonian. The tablets discussed here are composed in Babylonian. By the time they came to be written, cuneiform writing had a pedigree of some three thousand years and was nearing its eventual extinction around the second century AD, when it was finally displaced by simpler and more adaptable alphabetic systems. Babylonian is now very well understood after more than 150 years’ work since its initial decipherment by H. C. Rawlinson, Edward Hincks and others.

used for the so-called Royal Game of Ur. In addition, both tablets record a separate tradition according to which part of the playing grid is used for fortune-telling.

Evidence from archaeology

While the archaeology and history of this game cannot be discussed within the confines of the present article, certain crucial points do need to be set out. The first boards to be discovered were the famous mid-third-millennium bc examples excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley in the 1920s at the Royal Cemetery of Ur. It is these inlaid boards which have since given rise to the type name, namely the ‘Royal Game of Ur’, although for the purposes of study it is often more helpful to use the term ‘Game of Twenty Squares’. These earliest finds have only once been paralleled since, in a single carved wooden example from the near-contemporary cemetery at Shahr-i Sokhta, Seistan, Iran.

The third-millennium board, with twenty playing squares, takes the easily-recognisable form of a block of \(4 \times 3\) squares joined to a smaller block of \(2 \times 3\) by a ‘bridge’ of two squares. Each of the two players has seven identical pieces, while the dice associated with the finds were either tetrahedrons or four-sided stick dice.

Tetrahedal dice from Ur are made of stone or lapis lazuli. Such dice, often incorrectly described as ‘pyramidal’, have four flat sides with slightly rounded corners. In each case two corners are distinguished by inlaid points which provide the score when they fall uppermost, so that tossing a single tetrahedron gives two chances out of four. It may be observed that dice of this kind do not crop up in later Mesopotamian archaeology.

The second variety is the ‘stick’ or long dice, numbered one to four, ten examples of which were discovered at Ur. Described but not properly illustrated by Woolley (1934: pls 99 and 221), they tend to have been overlooked in the literature and, if anything, regarded as unknown in Mesopotamia. In fact, they too do not appear in other Mesopotamian contexts, and their presence at Ur is similarly suggestive of a possible external origin.

Boards for the Game of Twenty Squares become increasingly common throughout the second and first millennia bc, and over one hundred examples are now known from Iraq, Iran, Israel, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Cyprus, Egypt and Crete. Early in the second millennium bc the board underwent a slight change, which apparently prevailed throughout the remainder of its ancient Near Eastern history. The smaller block of six squares \((3 \times 2)\) that had previously formed one end of the board was straightened out into a continuation of the ‘bridge’ element to form a continuous projecting run of eight squares, or, in other words, a central run of twelve squares \(\text{in toto}\). The two stages of development are illustrated in Fig. 3.2.

The later board still possesses the characteristic twenty squares, and the number of marked or cross-cut squares sometimes remains the same, although after 2000 ac there is a noticeable tendency to dispense with marked squares in the corners.

Possible implications for playing the game

Since the discovery of the famous material from Ur, many writers have speculated as to how the game was actually played. The following remarks by Tim Kendall are quoted as

3 The author is currently preparing a volume that draws together in detail all the known archaeological, philological and ethnographical evidence for the five-thousand year history and development of the Game of Twenty Squares. For previous articles covering some of this material, see the bibliography below.

4 See Woolley 1934: 275–9, and the illustrated contribution by Andrea Becker in the present volume.


6 Bearing in mind that a certain proportion of the known boards are broken, and thus incomplete, at the narrow end.
The obverse of BM and DLB, obverse

The evidence from the tablets

BM and DLB, obverse

The obverse of BM contains a diagram formed of intersecting horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines. This network results in a field of eighty-four units, which in turn may be analysed as twelve sets of rectangles, each set subdivided into one central lozenge surrounded by six triangles. Each of these lozenges and triangles is inscribed with one or more cuneiform signs. Each central lozenge, furthermore, is inscribed with one sign of the zodiac, conveniently demonstrating the order in which the twelve rectangles must be read. This material from the obverse of BM is duplicated, and partly restored, by the obverse of DLB.

The cuneiform signs within each set of lozenges must be read in a clockwise direction to produce a meaningful phrase, which may be literally translated as follows:

I  Pegasus  One who sits in a tavern
II  Aries  A beer vat(?) will turn away
III  Pleiades/Taurus  I will pour out the dregs for you
IV  Gemini  You will find a friend
V  Cancer  You will stand in exalted places
VI  Leo  You will be powerful like a lion
VII  Virgo  You will go up the path
VIII  Libra  Like one who weighs up silver
IX  Scorpius  You will draw fine beer
X  Sagittarius  You will cross the ditch
XI  Capricornus  Like one who owns a herd
XII  Aquarius  You will cut meat

Remarks

Before he had seen the duplicating manuscript, J. Bottéro tentatively interpreted each of these curious phrases as a dog’s name, on the basis of the colophon, discussed below. This idea stemmed from the Babylonian practice of making figurines of dogs with their names inscribed on their backs in cuneiform, to frighten off devils. His later remarks (Bottéro 1956: 30–35), took account of Weidner’s study.

Landsberger (1966: 128) read these phrases together in pairs or triplets down the columns, left to right. In the translations adopted here, this produces the following:

a) i 1–2: One who sits in a tavern, a beer vat(?) will turn away;
b) i 3–ii l: I will pour out the dregs for you; you will find a friend;
c) ii 2–3: You will stand in exalted places; you will be powerful like a lion;
d) iii 1–3: You will go up the path; like one who weighs up silver you will draw fine beer, and
e) iv 1–3: You will cross the ditch, like one who owns a herd, you will cut meat.

Dismissing the apparent predictive or ‘omen-like’, flavour of these lines, he wrote that they were ‘nicht ernst zu nehmen; es sind weiterere Nuancen für das, was wir “das Spiel gewinnen” nennen’, and later more specifically: ‘die ersten Glieder dieser Doppelsätze spielen auf positionen im Spiel, die zweiten auf Grade oder Arten des Gewinnes an’. As shown below, this interpretation will not stand up to scrutiny, nor will his other proposal, namely that the grid side of the tablet showed the design of the game board which was to be drawn on the ground.

On the contrary, it is assumed crucially in this article that these twelve phrases must stand independently of one another rather than form such asymmetrical groups, in view of the clear graphic subdivisions found on the tablets. One needs, therefore, to interpret entries I, VIII and XI as ‘(you will be) one/like one who...’.

In some cases, as was already established by Bottéro, there is a clear relation in contemporary terms between a

In this and the following sections the translations and interpretations offered depend on Assyriological detail which has been omitted from the main text. Full transliterations of all cuneiform passages, with notes, are given in the Appendix.
given zodiac sign and its associated legend. The best
eamples are Gemini – a friend; Leo – resembling a lion;
Libra – weighing silver, and Capricorn – owning a herd.
In eight of the twelve, however, no equally convincing
connection leaps to mind, although it is of course possible
that to the Babylonians the associations were prompted
by specific traditions of which we are ignorant.

**DLB, reverse**
The reverse of DLB contains a second similar diagram with a
different set of inscriptions, although, unfortunately, the
surface is badly damaged and only part of most of the legends
can now be made out. These may be very tentatively
translated as follows:

1. **I** Popular omens will be imposed on you(?)
2. **II** There will be no beer tablet(?)
3. **III** ... you will not depart
4. **IV** You will ... ghee
5. **V** There will be ...
6. **VI** Justice(?) from a coloquinth(?)
7. **VII** A ... louse will be there(?)
8. **VIII** Tearing up(?); his bandage(?)
9. **IX** 
10. **X**
11. **XI** He will be equal(?) to someone in authority(?)
12. **XII** An upper millstone that cannot grind(?)

One can hardly escape from the idea that these short
phrases must have something to do with personal fortune-
telling. They read, in fact, not unlike the type of conventional
predictions associated with modern astrologers, such as 'you
will travel over water', or 'you will meet a handsome
stranger'.

As will be argued below, these twelve phrases, each linked
with a sign of the zodiac, correspond to the characteristic
central twelve squares of the later gaming board grid for the
Game of Twenty Squares. This material is thus taken as
evidence that the board could fulfill a dual function in
Babylonian society, at least during the first millennium BC.

The evidence for a game
That a game is also involved here, however, and is the
primary concern of the scribes concerned, is shown by
1. the colophon to DLB and
2. the rules that are provided on the reverse of BM.

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8 If one emended the text, it would be possible to read 'for sitting
about with friends', taking a cue from the terminology elsewhere
in the tablet, but the emendation is quite major.
9 CAD M/2: 19–20 gives only the meanings 'play' and 'game' for this
word, which derives from the verb  

The colophon to DLB
A partly cryptic note on the edge of DLB contributes two
crucial pieces of information. It informs us that the contents
of this tablet concerned a game (Babylonian mélultu), and,
additionally, gives us its name:

**DLB, Left Edge**
1 ‘Pack of Dogs’, for making splendid [...; the ...
2 are not written down; a game (fit for) nobles [...] 

This establishes that the information contained in DLB,
and by extension also that in the British Museum tablet, was
definitely concerned with a game. The game to which these
diagrams refers was called 'Pack of Dogs' in Babylonia. The
verb 'making splendid' (lárru) seems quite clear, although
unexpected in this context.

It is certainly curious that this note occurs on the tablet
which has only the diagrams, and gives none of the direct
information about playing the game that is provided in BM.

One might therefore assume that the scribe knew that the
predictions were made on the board that was also used for
the game; it seems far less likely that the fortune-telling itself
would be termed a mélultu, 'game'.

Landsberger (1960: 120) suggested that the gap at the end
of line 1 before line 2 here should be restored ‘(its rules of
play (seine Spielregeln)) are not written down'. This is
possible in view of the closely-related tablet BM, where the
rules were written down; perhaps, therefore, there was a
group of Late Babylonian scholarly tablets concerned with
this type of material of which we only have two.

The reverse of BM
The reverse of the British Museum tablet is subdivided into
two columns, to be read, as is conventional, from right to left.
These lines contain direct information about:
1. the gaming pieces,
2. the dice,
3. the throws needed to launch each piece, and
4. the effect of the individual pieces having either landed on
   or failed to land on the marked squares of the track.

This tablet is thus unique among surviving cuneiform
documents, and is by far the oldest attested example of rules
for a board game.

The language in which this information is couched is,
however, far from transparent. The following is a literal
translation of the Babylonian cuneiform which is intended to
convey exactly what is written on the tablet.

**BM Reverse:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COLUMN I</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Evidence in any of the adduced passages of a noun or verb for any
activity resembling fortune-telling. The latter fulfilled a
psychological role quite distinct from play in ancient
Mesopotamian society.
Six flying gaming pieces

An ox astragal, a sheep astragal,
two (that each) move the pieces

If the astragals score 2,
the Swallow sits at the head of a rosette (or: at the first rosette).
Should it (then) land on a rosette, a woman will love those who linger in a tavern;
regarding their pack, well-being falls to them.
If it does not land on a rosette, a woman will reject those who linger in a tavern, regarding their pack,
as a group well-being will not fall to them.

If the astragals score 5,
the Storm-bird sits at the fifth house.
Should it (then) land on a rosette, there will be enough food for the pack.
If it does not land on a rosette, starvation for the pack.

If the astragals score 6,
the Raven sits in the sixth house. Should it (then) land on a rosette,
there will be enough food for the pack. If it does not land on a rosette, starvation for the pack.

If the astragals score 7,
the Rooster sits in the seventh house.
If the astragals score 7,
two (that each) move the pieces

An ox astragal, a sheep astragal,

If the astragals score 8,
the Eagle sits in the tenth house.
If the astragals score 8,
say 'figure', or 'image'.
The verb KÁR.KÁR often means 'to shine'. This means that the first four terms could either be translated 'it doesn't shine', or 'shining figure'. The latter has been adopted in the translation here, and seems preferable, especially if the scribe is likening the pieces to planets (see below).
The second verb ŠE.BI.DA means 'to neglect', so one could translate 'It is not to be overlooked', or 'lazy figure'.

It is to be remarked that the Swallow, distinguished in this one respect at least from its fellow pieces, can be shown to differ also in its point of entry, in other words, it does not come in at 'House 2'. The expression in line 10 can likewise be interpreted in two ways:

1. at the first rosette, or
2. at the head of a (or: any) rosette

If the former, it would mean that the Swallow enters on square 4, the corner square, sometimes (as already mentioned) found marked with a rosette in boards of the first millennium ad. If the latter, it would mean that the Swallow can enter on the square before the rosette of its choice, of which there will usually be four. As discussed below, practical consideration of how the game might have worked suggests that perhaps both possibilities applied in play, and perhaps even that the first entry was on square four, and the other rosette possibilities were activated if the swallow was knocked off, and re-entered. Perhaps the specific nuance of the Sumerian term could be something akin to 'wild' in the sense of 'wild card'?

If the entry point for the Swallow could be the square before any rosette, it must have been possible somehow to throw it, otherwise the point or advantage of that position would be wasted, and this point supports the suggestion about the independent use of the two dice. Throvs of 5, 6, 7 or 10 place the other four pieces in the fifth, sixth, seventh or tenth 'houses' respectively.

The pieces:
The tablet specifies five 'flying' gaming pieces, here named after specific birds. Probably we should visualise each as an engraved disc, or possibly a three-dimensional bird's head on a small base. Four are described by the Sumerian ideograms NU KÁR.KÁR and the fifth by NU ŠE.BI.DA, although the Babylonian equivalents are uncertain (see discussion below).

Two remarkable and important points for the history of board games emerge at first sight in this tradition of the second millennium bc:

1. The five pieces are different one from another in form.

This contrasts directly with the archaeological evidence for the seven identical pieces used for the third-millennium game referred to above, and, more generally, is remarkable in any game from antiquity before the appearance of chess.

2. The pieces are in some way different in value, since the terms NU KÁR.KÁR and NU ŠE.BI.DA show that four differ from the fifth in at least one technical respect.

What then is meant by the ancient terms which are attributed to the pieces at the start of the rules?

In Sumerian NU can mean:

1. the negative, or
2. a 'figure', or 'image'.

The verb KÁR.KÁR often means 'to shine'. This means that the first four terms could either be translated 'it doesn't shine', or 'shining figure'. The latter has been adopted in the translation here, and seems preferable, especially if the scribe is likening the pieces to planets (see below).

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The Babylonian word for gaming piece is *passû*, perhaps, as Landenberger (1906: 126 n. 55) hinted, and H. Lamer had anticipated, related to the Greek *peßos*, 'pebble', 'gaming piece'. Two Sumerian equivalents to *passû* are known; *zana* and *bizza*, of which the latter is probably a word loaned from Babylonian back into Sumerian. There is some evidence from native Babylonian dictionaries that is relevant here. School exercises for pupils in cuneiform often drew on ancient lists of words, and it so happens that two fragments of such tablets in the British Museum, written down in about the sixth century BC, refer to this terminology, mentioning pieces (*passû*) and squares (*bitu*) of the gaming board, in both the Sumerian and the Babylonian languages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sumerian</th>
<th>Babylonian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wooden <em>bizz[a]</em></td>
<td><em>passû</em> (<em>...</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wooden <em>zana</em></td>
<td><em>dittu</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wooden <em>zana-house</em></td>
<td><em>passû-house</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wooden <em>lucky zana</em></td>
<td><em>lucky dittu</em> (= <em>passû</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wooden <em>four house</em></td>
<td><em>house four</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The term translated ‘lucky’ here is literally the name of a goddess of good fortune, pronounced Lamma. House 4 is probably singled out for mention as it is the first rosette square encountered by the piece on the board; see below.

### The Astragals

The next text tells us that each player needed two astragals (that is, knucklebones) to function as dice. One is the commonplace sheep astragal, the classic die of antiquity, but the other, very unexpectedly, is an ox astragal.

As indicated in Fig. 3.3, an ox astragal is more than twice the size of that of a sheep. Experiment shows that such a bone is impractical as a working die, being unwieldy and hard to roll in such a way as to obviate a charge of cheating. The comparative history of board games, while providing extensive documentation for the use of sheep astragals as dice, seems to provide no parallel for such a use of an ox bone. This specific stipulation must accordingly be significant for this game, and a possible explanation is suggested below.

### The board

The board is not mentioned as such, but two of its features can be inferred from the text:

1. The fact that it has ‘houses’, i.e. squares
2. The fact that it has marked squares distinct from the ‘houses’.

The cuneiform text uses the word ‘house’ (Sumerian *ē*), Babylonian *bitu*), where it must certainly mean playing-square. There are many parallels from different cultures for this usage. The presence of marked squares encountered by the pieces as they travel round the board can be inferred from a term expressed by an ambiguous Sumerian ideogram (see n. 1 above). This is the sign *SUR*, which has a variety of known equivalents in Babylonian. The majority are the names of small insects and can be discounted here. Alternative meanings are two words for ‘ditch’, *su*ru and *harru*, while the third is the little-attested Babylonian word *tanpu*.

Terms for ditch claim serious attention at first sight in the present context, since a ditch is suitable for marking the border between two plots or spaces, as in this case the ‘houses’. The Babylonian verb *aradu*, translated above as ‘land on’, literally means ‘to go down’, and would certainly be appropriate to describe the passage of a gaming piece into a marked square described as a ditch. This interpretation would make good sense textually, but a ‘ditch’ is not an obvious term for a square distinguished only by a graphic design, nor can it be convincingly identified with other features found on surviving Near-Eastern gaming boards.

This leads us to the third possibility, the Babylonian word *tanpu*. The meaning of this term has so far been unclear, but a lead is provided by the three-radical Semitic root which underlies the word, the sequence *n-p-h*. This particular root in Babylonian carries the meaning ‘to twinkle’, ‘to shine’, and it may therefore be conjectured that the derived noun *tanpu* means ‘twinkling thing’, or ‘shining thing’. In the light of this approximate etymological meaning one may propose that the word means ‘star’ or ‘rosette’, and take it to refer in this context to the marked squares on a gaming-board, often distinguished, as we have seen, by a rosette or star-like design. If this argument is correct, the rules at once become intelligible, since the tablet tells us in a rather roundabout way that the rosette squares are lucky if a player lands on them, and unlucky if he is forced to pass over them.

### The throws

Regarding the astragals, the likelihood is that only four of the six faces had a numerical value. This was certainly true in classical antiquity, although in some circumstances, such as when playing on sand, all six faces have sometimes been used.

### Ancient Board Games in Perspective

Tutankhamun as part of the gaming equipment used for the Game of Twenty Squares, among others, real and imitation, that vary between 1.7 and 3.1 cm in length, see Tait 1982: 38–39 and pl. XVI. See also Lamer 1989: 2021.

See e.g. Pieter 1931: 22.
The rules reveal that the scores of 2, 5, 6, 7 and 10 could somehow be produced by the two astragals when thrown together. Since it is clear that these throws are those required to launch the various pieces on their journey, and since the need for an element of hazard means that other scores should also be possible, one might perhaps infer that the two dice could produce eight of the nine numbers between 2 to 10.

Two dice cannot, of course, produce a numerical throw of 1.

The precise way in which two astragals can produce the scores between 2 and 10 is a matter for mathematical speculation, the text providing us with no evidence. The matter is complicated if the individual faces are numbered 1, 2, 3 and 5. Here, the possible combinations provide the numbers between 2 and 10, while omitting 9:

- 1+1=2
- 2+1=3
- 3+1=4
- 1+4=5
- 2+4=6
- 3+4=7
- 1+5=6
- 2+5=7
- 3+5=8
- 5+5=10

One possible solution, proposed by the late R. C. Bell, is to assume that the two dice have the same range of values, and that the individual faces are numbered 1, 2, 3 and 5. Here, the possible combinations provide the numbers between 2 and 10, while omitting 9:

- 1+1=2
- 2+1=3
- 3+1=4
- 1+4=5
- 2+4=6
- 3+4=7
- 1+5=6
- 2+5=7
- 3+5=8
- 5+5=10

A simple and quite different approach is to follow the hint provided by the relative size of the two dice, and suggest that the ox astragal functioned as a sort of ‘double-or-quits die’.

The large die could be thrown, when appropriate, to convert the score of the smaller die.

One could therefore postulate the following scheme:

1. The Swallow enters at a throw of 2 on the first rosette, or with the help of Fig. 3.4.
2. The Storm-bird enters House 5 at a throw of five. This would provide one of the scores 1, 2, 3 or 4. Of these, only 2 would serve to launch a piece, the board he would need to play the game, assuming that the board is that for Twenty Squares in its evolved form, and that the direction of play followed that proposed above.

As it is understood here, then, the development of the game, once the pieces are entered, centres on whether or not they can land on marked squares. The fortunes of the five pieces are expressed in various oblique terms, and they are directly dependent on this point:

2: Swallow : success with women + general well-being / failure with women + no general well-being
3: Storm-bird : sufficiency of food / starvation
4: Raven : sufficiency of fine beer / lack of fine beer
5: Rooster : sufficiency of meat / lack of meat
6: Eagle : sufficiency of meat / lack of meat

Note that the entry of the pieces and the consequences of whether or not they land on marked squares are the only points covered by the text of the rules.

The play of the game may be summed up most clearly with the help of Fig. 3.4.
1) The Swallow enters at a throw of 2 on the first rosette, or on the square before any rosette square. If the former, the Swallow has four chances of landing on a rosette (ignoring for the moment the possibility of being knocked off to start again).
2) The Storm-bird enters House 5 at a throw of five. This square will be the first of the central row of twelve. From this point the Storm-bird has three chances of landing on a rosette.
3) The Raven enters House 6, the subsequent square, at a throw of 6. It also has three chances of landing on a rosette.
4) The Rooster enters House 7, the next square, at a throw of 7. It also has three chances of landing on a rosette.
5) The Eagle enters House 10 at a throw of 10. From here it has only two chances of landing on a rosette.
Hebrew and Arabic sources, and we may assume that this common usage, for example, in Demotic, Egyptian, Greek, Squares, given by the second tablet, ‘Pack of Dogs’ derives clearly from the ancient name for the Game of Twenty Squares, and also that the route followed by the pieces is that suggested above. The rather colourful description of the fate of the gamesmen becomes more intelligible if one assumes that the players started with a pile of tokens. As each piece moved down the track quantities of tokens would be won from the pool or paid into the pool as corresponding to each piece’s chances of landing on a rosette. This would naturally choose bird names to convey the idea of the constellations as such cannot be said to move through the zodiac, but perhaps these bird names are here meant rather to stand for the five planets that can be seen with the naked eye, i.e. Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and Mercury. Support for this proposal comes from the fact that the Babylonian word for ‘pack’ in the name ‘Pack of Dogs’ has a second meaning, ‘troops’, and it is possible that there is more than a touch of humour in the scribe’s mind, in that writing about his gaming pieces, traditionally known as dogs, he has by means of a pun reinterpreted them as boisterous soldiers.

There is a further tradition preserved in Irit-Marduk-balitu’s document, however. The names of the dog-pieces themselves, just to confuse things further, are bird names. Why should this be?

We must redirect our attention to the diagram laid out on the other side of the tablet. Here we have a sequence of twelve squares associated with the signs of the zodiac, for each of which a rather cryptic legend is quoted. As argued in this study, these twelve squares represent the twelve squares of the central row on the game-board, and the scribe is suggesting that they therefore represent the twelve portions of the heavens.

At least four of these five bird names were also used to denote astronomical constellations, showing that they had definite astral associations. According to this tradition the Raven is Corvus, the Rooster is Lepus, the Eagle is Aquila, and the Swallow is W. Pscies (see conveniently Hunger/ Pingree 1999: 27–7). This leaves the Storm-bird unidentified, but that term does not seem to occur anywhere else at all, and it is likely that it is an alternative name for another bird name usually used with astronomical meaning. Obviously the constellations as such cannot be said to move through the zodiac, but perhaps these bird names are here meant rather to stand for the five planets that can be seen with the naked eye, i.e. Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and Mercury. Support for this proposal comes from the fact that the Raven is already known to stand also for Mars in some contexts, although the other identifications suggested here cannot yet be supported from other cuneiform texts.

Nevertheless the idea is not so far-fetched in that the scribe would naturally choose bird names to convey the idea of fateful bodies moving or flying across the heavens.

In support of this note we may cite a famous letter in Babylonian cuneiform that was sent to the Egyptian pharaoh at Amarna in Egypt by the Mitanni King Tushratta in the fourteenth century bc. This tablet details a lengthy inventory of expensive gifts which the Mitanni ruler was despatching to Egypt for political reasons, and it includes at one point the intriguing item ‘five golden dogs and five silver dogs’. It is hard to imagine what these might have been other than a set of fancy pieces for the Game of Twenty Squares.

The fate of the pieces is described in the rules in very human terms, however, and it is easy to imagine the game being played in a tavern by freebooting soldiers, the bets setting who was to pay for the food and drink and any warmer entertainment that might be on offer in the establishment. There is a rather evocative phrase in a cuneiform letter of about 1800 bc from the site of Mari in Syria, which refers to ‘the deserters come to the tavern, to you, for playing’, and this picture sets the scene directly for the phraseology in the tablet. This view is supported by the fact that the Babylonian word for ‘pack’ in the name ‘Pack of Dogs’ has a second meaning, ‘troops’, and it is possible that there is more than a touch of humour in the scribe’s mind, in that writing about his gaming pieces, traditionally known as dogs, he has by means of a pun reinterpreted them as boisterous soldiers.

We must finally consider the problem of the relationship between obverse and reverse in BM. This tablet details a lengthy inventory of expensive gifts which the Mitanni ruler was despatching to Egypt for political reasons, and it includes at one point the

14 See, for example, Popper 1931: 29–30; Nahid 1902: 346–47; Murray 1915: 209 (for nard); 210 (for chia). 15 Knudtzon 1915: 174 ff. 8–9 (EA 22), see Most 1987: 130. The two sets of dogs are grouped with a pair (3) of alabaster tulamita’s, an

Fig. 3.4 The proposed starting points for the five pieces and the progress of the game (first millennium).
Table 3.2 juxtaposes the two sets of information, showing some very suggestive parallels. The correspondences between these two groups 17 are of several kinds: Legends 1–4 match the Swallow, and concern drinking in a tavern. Legend 3, ‘I will pour out the dregs for you’, probably means ‘we will drink deep together’, and indeed Legend 5 could also be translated ‘You are here to drink’, rather than ‘You will stand in high places’, if one seeks to draw them even closer together.18 There is no correspondence in the legends to the question of ‘food’ (or ‘bread’), the concern of both the Storm-bird and the Raven, but Legend 9 directly overlaps with ‘fine beer’, the concern of the Rooster, and Legend 12 likewise picks up the question of ‘meat’ that is associated with the Eagle. In outline there is clearly a correspondence between diagram and rules in Legends 1–4, 5, 9 and 12 at least.

As noted above, Legends 6, 8 and 11 clearly overlap with the nature of their zodiacal signs. Legend 4, which also does so, should perhaps be relocated here rather than in the preceding group, since a woman’s love or hatred is probably to be regarded in this context as a different thing from friendship between men.

The remaining two Legends, 7 and 10, share the feature that they could conceivably be understood as applying to the board itself. In Legend 7, the ‘path’ could be understood as the track along the board, i.e. the sequence of houses. In Legend 10, ‘you will cross the ditch’ could be seen to mean simply ‘you will surmount your difficulties’.19 Alternatively both could be taken to concern nuances of play not touched on by the rules, the first suggesting (for example) that a piece might be advanced beyond what is actually scored by the dice, and the second that a piece might be constrained to pass over a certain point or the like. It does not, however, seem possible to identify the term ‘ditch’ here with the sign ŞUR that occurs in the rules, for which a meaning ‘ditch’ is one possible interpretation, as discussed above.

These suggestions are mentioned with diffidence, since they would mean that different categories of information were presented in a very compressed and obscure format, which is perhaps rather unlikely. A further problem is posed by the second tablet described above, which proves the existence of at least a second set of legends associated with the run of twelve squares.

What, then, is the nature of the relationship between the two sides of the British Museum tablet?

It must be stressed that the diagram of twelve squares cannot be taken to represent a whole game board in itself. For one thing, there is no evidence for a complete 4 × 3 square board, be it from ancient Mesopotamia proper or from elsewhere in the ancient Near East.20 Furthermore, it is hardly possible to make sense of the rules if one were to posit the track along the board, i.e. the sequence of houses. In Legend 10, ‘you will cross the ditch’ could be seen to mean simply ‘you will surmount your difficulties’.21 Alternatively both could be taken to concern nuances of play not touched on by the rules, the first suggesting (for example) that a piece might be advanced beyond what is actually scored by the dice, and the second that a piece might be constrained to pass over a certain point or the like. It does not, however, seem possible to identify the term ‘ditch’ here with the sign ŞUR that occurs in the rules, for which a meaning ‘ditch’ is one possible interpretation, as discussed above.

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Irving L. Finkel

Table 3.1 Information given about the pieces in the game. A hypothetical scale of tokens has been attributed, corresponding to each piece’s chances of landing on a rosette.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Piece</th>
<th>Starting throw needed</th>
<th>Number of chances at a rosette</th>
<th>Advantages from a rosette square</th>
<th>Tokens won/lost</th>
<th>Ancient category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swallow</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Women and well-being</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NU KÂR.KÂR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storm-bird</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Food</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>NU KÂR.KÂR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raven</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Food</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>NU KÂR.KÂR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rooster</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fine beer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>NU KÂR.KÂR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eagle</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Meat</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>NU ŠE.BI.DA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2 The relationship between the diagram legends and the rules presented by the tablet BM.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Piece</th>
<th>From the rules</th>
<th>Diagram legends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swallow</td>
<td>A woman will love those who linger in a tavern</td>
<td>1. One who sits in a tavern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regarding their pack, well-being will fall to them</td>
<td>2. The beer vat(?) will turn away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. I will pour out the dregs for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. You will find a friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storm-bird</td>
<td>There will be enough food for the pack</td>
<td>5. You will stand in exalted places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6. You will be powerful like a lion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raven</td>
<td>There will be enough food for the pack</td>
<td>7. You will go up the path</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8. Like one who weighs up silver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rooster</td>
<td>There will be enough fine beer for the pack</td>
<td>9. You will draw fine beer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10. You will cross the ditch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eagle</td>
<td>The pack will eat its fill of meat</td>
<td>11. Like one who owns a herd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12. You will cut meat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BM. Table 3.2 juxtaposes the two sets of information, showing some very suggestive parallels. The correspondences between these two groups are of several kinds: Legends 1–4 match the Swallow, and concern drinking in a tavern. Legend 3, ‘I will pour out the dregs for you’, probably means ‘we will drink deep together’, and indeed Legend 5 could also be translated ‘You are here to drink’, rather than ‘You will stand in high places’, if one seeks to draw them even closer together.18 There is no correspondence in the legends to the question of ‘food’ (or ‘bread’), the concern of both the Storm-bird and the Raven, but Legend 9 directly overlaps with ‘fine beer’, the concern of the Rooster, and Legend 12 likewise picks up the question of ‘meat’ that is associated with the Eagle. In outline there is clearly a correspondence between diagram and rules in Legends 1–4, 5, 9 and 12 at least.

As noted above, Legends 6, 8 and 11 clearly overlap with the nature of their zodiacal signs. Legend 4, which also does so, should perhaps be relocated here rather than in the preceding group, since a woman’s love or hatred is probably to be regarded in this context as a different thing from friendship between men.

The remaining two Legends, 7 and 10, share the feature that they could conceivably be understood as applying to the board itself. In Legend 7, the ‘path’ could be

17 It is worth pointing out that, as far as can be seen, there is no connection between the rules in BM and the alternative twelve-square grid in DLB.

18 The reason for this is that there are two homophonous Babylonian verbs: šaqû A, ‘to grow high’, ‘move upwards’, and šaqû B, ‘to give to drink’.

19 Compare perhaps the first-millennium Assyrian tamîtu, or oracle request, quoted in the CAD S: 415, that asks: ‘will he cross each of the canals and ditches that come his way?’

20 Compare perhaps the first-millennium Assyrian tamîtu, or oracle request, quoted in the CAD S: 415, that asks: ‘will he cross each of the canals and ditches that come his way?’

21 Compare perhaps the first-millennium Assyrian tamîtu, or oracle request, quoted in the CAD S: 415, that asks: ‘will he cross each of the canals and ditches that come his way?’
the existence of such a board. It is intrinsically improbable that the two sides of the cuneiform tablet should be completely unconnected despite their textual overlap, and since the main feature of the late board for the Game of Twenty Squares is indeed a sequence of twelve squares, it is hard to avoid identifying them with those of the diagram.

There is, moreover, an additional piece of independent evidence to bolster the claim that the game covered by these rules must have been a universally familiar board game. This is a passage from a cuneiform letter of the seventh century BC that occurs on a tablet from the library of Assurbanipal, king of Assyria, found at Kuyunjik (Nineveh), his royal capital. It is a literary letter about war among several collected on the tablet, addressed to the king himself. The writer alludes to the game to convey his confidence in his own future triumph.

The three relevant lines may be translated as follows:

Your troops, well-being falls to [them];
Let them go out from House 5, House 6, House 7:
Alone I will make my exit, and get as far as the...

The extent to which this highly individual phraseology parallels that of the rules makes it virtually certain that the same game is in question. It is evident that the Swallow must have already been entered on the board and the next three pieces also successfully entered on their starting squares, and the passage probably confirms the impression given by the rules that the pieces had to be entered in a fixed order. The opposition then only had to launch his Eagle to feel sure of victory. The real meaning of ‘alone I will make my exit’ might rather be ‘I shall play out in one go.’

It is very much in the order of things Assyriological that the writer alludes to the game, should be broken and defy certain restoration; a final word, evidently a description of how one actually won the game, should be the product of a treatise. What, however, is particularly revealing is that the passage has here been applied to the behaviour of real soldiers. What, however, is particularly telling for our purposes is that the writer alludes to the game in his letter without any preamble, such as ‘as one might say in the game of...’ His elaborate metaphor shows that the reference must have been instantly recognisable, much as chess would be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to be in a parallel usage today. A political speech might draw on chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’), but no-one today would draw any analogy from chess to drive home a point (‘gambit’, or ‘checkmate’).
While these ideas certainly provide a complementary background to an assessment of the written evidence studied here, they do not suffice, at least in the present writer’s view, to indicate that the twenty-square grid was preponderantly used for fortune-telling activities. On the contrary, the known distribution and occurrence of twenty-square grids throughout the ancient Near East (and elsewhere) points overwhelmingly to its primary use as a board game played for entertainment.

Because the traditions associated with the twelve squares were ancient and hallowed ones, and mixed up with the game when played for fun or for bets, the original compiler behind Itti-Marduk-bali-us tablet BM has recorded all the information at his disposal in his attempt to make sense of the national game of Babylonia. It is an interesting point, of course, why such a tablet should have been written in Mesopotamia. Very few cuneiform inscriptions have been identified that seem to answer ‘modern’ questions, such as Mesopotamia. Very few cuneiform inscriptions have been identified that seem to answer ‘modern’ questions, such as ‘How do you play the Royal Game of Ur?’.25 It is, in a way, misleading to describe the tablet BM simply as giving rules. The scribe did not set out to provide the information that would allow a modern reader to grasp the play of an unfamiliar game from the written word alone. Everybody knew perfectly well how the traditional game was played normally, so it is likely that the details preserved for us are in some way unusual, perhaps reflecting a more complex game, or one with some subtle difference. One might suggest that it was the betting scores that were his concern in part. Let us suppose that originally, in the game’s earlier manifestations, the rosettes were lucky in a very simple way: a player who landed on one gained a second throw, and if he missed, he forfeited that chance. The game is perfectly playable and enjoyable on that basis, and in many social contexts that would be all there was to it. The high-pressure gambling of the sort that seems to be reflected in the tablet’s rules is probably a secondary or specific development, involving one scoring system which happens to be recorded for us here.

The interpretative view of both pieces and board that interested the scholars who transmitted these tablets constitutes an unusually detached look at a very traditional aspect of Babylonian culture, in which an awareness of astrology was very much to the fore. Perhaps, indeed, such a composition was a response to stimulus from outside the cuneiform world. Of interest in this regard is a fragment of Greek papyrus from Oxyrhynchus from the late second or early third century AD, which contains part of a commentary on a thirty-square board game, evidently a late form of the Egyptian game of Senet.24 This commentary, fragmentary though it is, offers several rather interesting points for comparison with the cuneiform text:

24 Again, see Andrea Becker’s article here. Meyer (1982) has also made reference in this connection to an article by C. J. Gadd, which saw a reference to an obscure omen drawn from a sheep’s intestine to a supposed Babylonian board game reminiscent of Chinese Chess (Gadd 1939: 66–72). In the present writer’s opinion, however, this latter theory is totally erroneous, since it is based on a textual misunderstanding (see Finkel 1991a), so it cannot be counted as supporting evidence.
25 Examples include recipes for beer, instructions for dyeing wool and procedures for making glass, but such invaluable cuneiform texts are conspicuously rare.

The pieces are also called ‘dogs’. The author of the commentary identifies the thirty squares of the Senet board as corresponding to the thirty days of the lunar month.

Some at least of the squares on the board are known as ‘houses’. Reference is made within the commentary to a whole book in Greek on the subject.

Here we glimpse considerable late astronomical, or rather astrological, interpretation being applied to the characteristics of a traditional board game in Egypt which, like the Royal Game of Ur, was probably likewise originally wholly independent of such associations.

**Applying these rules to the board for the Game of Twenty Squares**

The assumption made here that these late cuneiform rules apply to the Game of Twenty Squares is based on the following five points:

1. The reverse of BM inescapably presents rules for a board game for which dice and pieces are required, for use on a board that has a sequence of houses, some of which are distinguished by a characteristic mark, here interpreted as a rosette.
2. It is plausible that the underlying board and therefore the game itself should be one known from the archaeological record rather than one which is totally unknown, since surviving gaming boards from the ancient Near East are surprisingly numerous.
3. Archaeology has established that there were really only two board games in ancient Mesopotamia that were enduringly popular, namely the Game of Fifty-Eight Holes and the Game of Twenty Squares.
4. The present author – at least – has been wholly unable to make sense of these rules if applied to the board for Fifty-Eight Holes, but they do make sense, and produce a good, working race game, if applied to the first-millennium board for the Game of Twenty Squares.26
5. The fact that a sequence of twelve squares with certain astrological associations also used for fortune-telling is recorded in the same context as the rules, and in terms related to those rules, substantiates the assumption, in that the first-millennium boards for the Game of Twenty Squares are invariably characterised by a sequence of twelve central squares.

**Playing the Game of Twenty Squares**

To conclude, it is appropriate to offer some remarks as to how this race game for two players could have been played in the...
first millennium BC, applying the preceding interpretation of the rules tablet to the board plan in use at that time.

A THE ROUTE
As suggested at the outset of this article, it may be proposed that the route is that represented in Fig. 3.5, although it must be clearly stated that there is no evidence on the point.

B EQUIPMENT
1 Board with later lay-out showing a central run of twelve squares.
2 Five different pieces for each player, each inscribed or otherwise marked to represent the Swallow, the Storm-bird, the Raven, the Rooster and the Eagle.
3 One four-sided die, with the faces marked 1, 2, 3 and 4.
4 One four-sided die, with two faces marked ‘yes’ and two ‘no’.
5 Twenty-five counters for each player.

C GOAL
The goal is to enter all five pieces onto the board according to the required throw, and negotiate them round the track and off the end. The opponent’s pieces are to be knocked off whenever possible. In order to win the maximum number of counters, pieces are to be landed on a rosette wherever possible.

D PLAYING THE GAME
1 Both players put ten counters into the Pool. The numbered die is thrown, and the player with the higher score takes ‘white’ and plays first.
2 Taking alternate turns the players try to launch their pieces on the Board. A throw of 2 from the die launches the Swallow, which probably first enters at 4, a rosette square. Understanding the rule as referring to ‘the first rosette’, although possibly on re-entry it could be placed on the square before any chosen rosette square (as discussed above). To launch the other pieces, 5, 6, 7 or 10 must be thrown for the Storm-bird, Raven, Rooster and Eagle respectively. This is achieved by throwing the four-sided die to produce a primary score of 1, 2, 3 or 4. The ‘yes’/‘no’ die is then thrown. If ‘yes’ turns up, the score from the first die is converted as follows: 1 = 5 , 2 = 6, 3 = 7 and 4 = 10. This will allow another piece to be started from squares 5, 6, 7 or 10 respectively. If the ‘no’ face turns up, the throw is lost.
3 Pieces must be entered in the correct order on the track, but once on can be moved off on a subsequent throw before the others are entered, to prevent being knocked off by the opponent’s newly-entered piece using the same starting square.
4 As the pieces move round, throws of the numbered die are used, converted if required by the ‘double-or-quits’ die, in order to negotiate the pieces onto the rosettes while en route. If this is accomplished, counters are won from the Pool each time to the value of the piece concerned, i.e. 3 for the Swallow, 4 for the Storm-bird, Raven and Rooster, and 5 for the Eagle.
5 Moves must always be made if there is space. If a piece is forced to pass over a rosette without landing on it the corresponding number of counters must be paid into the Pool.

Fig. 3.5 The route of play

6 A piece landing on a square occupied by the opponent knocks off that piece, which must start the route over again after throwing the specific starting throw needed.
7 Pieces on a rosette square are safe from being knocked off. Perhaps two of a player’s men can share a square and immunity from capture.
8 Exact throws are needed to move the pieces off the end.
9 A penalty may be exacted by the winner for each of his opponent’s pieces that are still on the board after he has got all his pieces home.

Appendix: The Assyriological Material

I Transliteration of BM 33333B and DLB obverse
There follows a transliteration of BM, restored after DLB where necessary, with variants from DLB noted second:

| I | [AŠ.GÁN] | [a]-ši-bi-zi-[a] | [i]-bi |
| II | [JUN.GÁ] | [da (?)]-an-nu-na-a-ha-dr/ar |
| III | MÜL.MÜL | ‘qa’-du-su-a-tab-bak-ku/x |
| IV | MAŠ.MAS | tap-po-a-ta-ra-dlí |
| V | MÜL.ALLA | ka-qu-ta-za-az (,-ma) |
| VI | UR.A | li/sah-ki-ši-ša-da/dan-ni-in |
| VII | ABSIN | ú-su-su-te-la-æ/am/el-lam-ma |
| VIII | MÜL.RIN | ki-[i]-šá-qí-las/sás-qa |
| IX | GIR.TAB | ta-su-ba/#ab-ka-šu-an-ru/ni |
| X | PA.BIL.SAG | ta-bi-ir (,ma) ḫa-da-rí |
| XI | MUL.MAS | ki-[i]-be-lu/ču-bi-łu |
| XII | MUL.GU | ta-na-ki-ši-i-ti |

THE ZODIAC SEQUENCE
It is uncertain whether the sequence of twelve zodiacal signs in BM should be taken to represent a genuine tradition of the zodiac itself. Despite the date of the tablet, 177/176 BC, the tradition is not that of the astronomical schools of Babylon adopted c. 400 BC, and exemplified in Neugebauer 1955, where the signs zib.ME represent Pegasus, as found in BM 77824, the so-called ‘T₄-tablet’ (Stephenson and Walker 1985: 15, 17). MÜL.MÜL is either Pleiades or Taurus, depending on how strictly the Late Babylonian zodiac tradition is followed. Note also that the cycle commences with Pegasus rather than Aries.

PHILOLOGICAL NOTES
I Restoration follows Landsberger, rather than the [a]-bi-zi as originally suggested by Bottéro.
II Landsberger 1960: 128 and n. 62 suggested [ma]-an-nu ma-šu-ḫa-er (wer holt ihn zurück?), but an interrogative is quite inappropriate here, and rather than see this as ‘(Achtung!) falsch für wadjhar’, the phrase more probably involves a sandhi-writing. The restoration [da]-an-nu, ‘person’, remains unsupported, however. The meaning adopted here, ‘beer or wine vat’, seems more appropriate in the context than that of the adj. dannu, ‘strong (man)’.

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III Landsberger read here: qa-du-tu a-tap ḫu-su /sī, 'Mache, dass Schlamm den Kanal triegen lässt'; the last sign in DLB remains unclear.

VII Landsberger read ḫu-usu, 'täglich', at this point; an alternative possibility for the Babylonian in this line that seems even less probable is 'you will tie up a duck'!

2 Transliteration of DLB Reverse

The reverse of DLB is so poorly preserved that only one legend is complete, and that is obscure. The following is an attempt to interpret what survives, but all the readings are tentative at best. As indicated above, it is uncertain whether the columns should be read from right to left or from left to right, seeing the reverse as an alternative arrangement to the diagram on the obverse. For the moment the order follows right to left.

V 1 at-[x-x] e [b][i] a-[x]
   2 a-mu-tt[u] UN en [di]-ak
   3 ni-pi-al[i]-bi ia-ak
VI 1 ni-[x]-id ul [tu]-‘dag’-’par
   2 tu-[x]-ix-hi-me-tu
   3 ba-ia-at IS-ḫu-ap-tu
VII 1 ‘NIG’-SI:ŠA id ‘ra’-gi’-id”

3 Colophon to DLB

1 KASKAL.KUR UR. “GI,” MEŠ lid ḫu ur-ru [b][u ……];
   2 NU SAR. MEŠ mi-lul-ti NUN.MEŠ[……]

NOTES
1 Landsberger read the end of line 1 as lid ku-ur-ru (k-ki ……), translating ‘es bezeckt Spannung zu erzeugen’. The signs, however, seem to be clearly ḫu ur ḫu. The emendation mentioned above, reading alūḫ (TUŠ) b[l]-ru-ṯ[i] ……, offers excellent sense, but on present evidence is unwarranted.

4 Transliteration of BM 33333B Reverse

COLUMN I
1 UD.GAL.MUŠEN NU KĀR.KĀR
2 UGA.MUŠEN NU KĀR.KĀR

Fig. 3.6 The lost tablet DLB: obverse, reverse and lower edge (photo courtesy Prof. J. Bottero).

Fig. 3.7 Author’s drawing of the lost tablet DLB, after the photographs in Fig. 3.6.; obverse, reverse and lower edge
3 | On the Rules for the Royal Game of Ur

Accordingly, read salmu marnabitu, or salmu napalu, and translate the phrase here 'shining figure'.

The Sumerian verb ŠE.BI.DA is equated with Babylonian egû, 'to be careless, negligent', hence the provisional translation 'lax' adopted above. The adj. egû has the meaning 'negligent person', sometimes with the distinct meaning 'sinful person' (see CAD E: 47). In view of this, perhaps the meaning here is akin to 'wild', in the modern sense of a 'wild card'. If so, this characteristic could be reflected in the fact that the Swallow might not have a fixed starting square like the other pieces, but, as discussed above, could enter at one more than possible square.

The Sumerian ZI.IN.GI corresponds to Babylonian kiššula, 'knucklebone', or 'astragal'; see Landsberger 1960: 121; 126–7 for discussion and passages. As noted there, another unidentified Akkadian term occurs in the lexical compilation Antagal F 245–46 (MSL 17): gal-ba-ba-la-tag-ga = MIN (= múlulu) šá ₅ ₆₄ ₄ to play with gaming pieces

zi-in-gi ₅-₄ = MIN šá ₅ ₆₄ ₄-₄ x-

1 The Babylonian reading of Sumerian UD.GAL.MUŠÉN, literally a 'Storm-Bird', is unknown. Landsberger 1960: 122 n. 39 suggested either agallu or pargallu. As indicated above, NU is either the plain negative, or the Babylonian salmu, 'figure'. The ancient lexical equivalent to KAR.KAR in this and the following lines is either nubītu, 'to shine brightly', or napašu, 'to glow, said of stars and the moon' (among other nuances). Both would fit here, if the gaming pieces are understood as constellations or planets.
10. Compare perhaps Arabic kāhil, kahanin, kahhar, used both for astragals and cubic dice (see Culin 1868: 828).

2 a-bi-ik pa-as-su: the question here is whether a-bi-ik A to send, usher in, lead, or a-bi-ik B, to turn upside down, is the correct verb. Weidner 1956: 178 had suggested the latter, but Landsberger 1960: 122 fn. 40 opted for the former, translating, undoubtedly correctly, as 'two, die die figures (nach Hause) bringen'. He was followed in this by the CAD A/2: 6, who, however, mistranslate completely as 'two (pawns) who bring (home) passu-figures'; the passu-figures are the pawns! Landsberger had hesitated in that a-bi-ik A is only used with animate object in first-millennium contexts, even though he had pointed out in the same article that passu, in distinction to sarru, '... haben nur zwei Kategorien, männlich und weiblich' (Landsberger 1960: 118–19 and 126). In any case, the pieces were clearly conceived of as animate by the scribe: they are birds, dogs and soldiers all at once.

12 For the restoration of the name and the sequence of the third-generation Mesopotamian scribe, see again Oelsner 2002: 14. This earlier scribe dates his tablet to Year 12 of Antiochus and Antiochus his son.

29 For some discussion of cubic and other dice in ancient Near East, see Dales 1968; Klinger-Brandt 1980; Hallo 1985; 1996. The earliest cubic die from the ancient Near East known to the present writer is the Urkuk period example from Tell Chuera described in Moortgat-Correns 1988: 160.

30 For the restoration of the name and the sequence of the third-generation Mesopotamian scribe, see again Oelsner 2002: 14. This earlier scribe dates his tablet to Year 12 of Antiochus and Antiochus his son.

31 If this third generation has been correctly restored, it emerges that the second generation Marišu-zib had three sons, Idën-Bel as above, BEH-...), and a previously undocumented third case of a soon named Marišu-zib-bālu; cf. Oelsner 2002: 14.
incidentally casts light on the use of GÍN = puš, likewise restricted to colophons, whose origin has otherwise remained unexplained. It is curious, however, that i should be omitted both in the tablet BM and the first colophon quoted above.

Transliterations of the lexical tests

The first of these fragments has now been published in hand copy, in Gesche 2001.

1. BM 78113 (86-7:20,16) see Gesche 2001: 661-2.
   Obverse, second section after ruling:
   7. [gi]i-é-za-na
   [bi][i-t][e-zi-]su
   8. [gi]i-é-[lama]-za-na
   la-ma-su MIN
   9. [gi]i-é-úr-ri
   [bi][i-t][e-ri-be]

   Obverse, continuing after 9 lines which are an amplification of Hh VI (a lexical list) 189-90:
   11. [gi]i-é-úr-ri
   [bi][i-t][e-ri-be]
   12. [gi]i-é-za-na
   MIN MIN
   13. [gi]i-é-úr-ri
   [bi][i-t][e-ri-be]
   14. [gi]i-é-[lama]-za-na
   [la-ma-su MIN]
   15. [gi]i-é-[lama]
   bi-[i-t er-be]

Transliteration of the Assyrian royal letter:
The passage that makes reference to the game is in a literary letter addressed to the Assyrian king Assurbanipal (669–621 bc), included among several others on a tablet in Babylonian script from the royal library. The edition principles of this document, K 4449, was given in Lamberg 1957-8: 382–5, a newer translation may be found in Gesche 1989: 55-9. The relevant lines, col. ii 12’-14’, read as follows:
12. Lú um ma-mi i-ka lú ki lu-lú[m-lú-ma]
13. É [ba]-sú [bi] 6 inu É [7 lu][la-um-ma]
14. É-du lu-ša-am-ma lu-lí ik ë-di ku-x
12’ Your troops, well-being falls to [them];
13’ Let them go out from House 5, House 6, House 7:
14’ Alone I will make my exit, and get as far as the …
Livingstone 1989: 57 proposed to read the final word ku-di-rí, but collation shows that there are only three aligned horizontal wedges, exactly as copied by Lambert, so the sign di-rí(KU) is not possible. It appears, however, that there is a Winkelhaken wedge visible to the right of the vertical, suggesting DA, but no suitable word ku-DA suggests itself.

The verb wayi₃ in line 14’ of the letter does not provide a reading for R₈ in the rules. As understood here, the passage refers to the pieces having been successfully manoeuvred onto the board with the right throws, and thus being ready to race to the end, it is not a reference to landing on marked squares. In other words, the text probably reflects play of the race game without betting complications.

This is an appropriate place to mention a motif that appears in certain late-period bilingual religious texts, which might draw for its imagery on the play of this or a similar board game; the following quotation is a good example:

ud-dè é-10-ta 10-àm ba-ra-an-è
ú₃ mu ína è [ba-an-nit][na-an-nit ú-še-e][g₃-a-a]
ud-dè é-10-ta 10-àm ba-ra-an-è
ú₃ mu ína è é-se-ret é-se-ret ú-še-e][g₃-a-a]
The storm will drive out five from House 5;
The storm will drive out ten from House 10.

For references see CAD H: 66 sub hamil lex, where a very different interpretation is offered, however.

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Assyriological abbreviations
CCT: Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum. London. 1896–
MSL: Materialien zum Semitischen Lexion. Rome. 1937–