Senet - An Egyptian Board Game

Abstracts:

“Senet was a popular board game in ancient Egypt and may possibly be one of the ancestors of Backgammon. People of all levels of ancient Egyptian society played it and some believe it had religious meaning. Senet was the favorite pastime of king tut and in fact his mother in-laws name "Nefertiti" can be traced to one of the symbols on the gameboard).

The popularity of this game is evident from the number of sets that have been found in Egyptian tombs, from those of commoners to those of the Pharaohs. So far, almost fifty sets have been discovered, many of them in perfect condition with the pieces and "dice" (either knucklebones or sticks) still intact.

The oldest known reference to Senet is in a wall painting in the tomb of the Third Dynasty Pharaoh Hesy (c. 2650 BC), which shows the game being played with seven pawns per player (sets and paintings have been found with as many as ten pawns per player). These first paintings show Senet being played between two players, but later paintings show a single player playing against an invisible opponent. From these two different depictions, it is very possible that Senet began as a game, but later acquired a magical or holy quality and became something of a ritual in and of itself. This situation does have parallels in our era; witness the mystic aura Chess has developed in movies such as The Seventh Seal and works of literature where the hero plays Chess (or a similar game) against Death, the Devil, a god, etc.

Oddly enough, no rules for Senet have ever been found, either written on papyrus or
painted on a tomb wall. It appears as though the game may have been so popular that it was taught entirely by word of mouth from one player to another, because almost everyone knew how to play it anyway. Still, a number of people have created what they believe are the closest reconstructions of the rules of Senet, based on tomb paintings of the game, references to it in Egyptian writing, and by looking at its descendants: games such as Dublets, Tables, and our modern Backgammon.

The Senet board is made up of 30 squares in three rows of ten squares apiece, like so:

The squares are numbered on the first row 1-10 from left to right, on the second row 11-20 right to left, and on the third row 21-30 left to right. The pieces, or Pawns, follow the path of the numbers, left to right on the top row, then right to left on the middle row, and left to right on the bottom row (or in some versions, the reverse of that).

Squares 26 through 30 have symbols on them, as does square 15, which in some variations is the starting point for the pieces. In some sets, square 30 does not have a symbol, but is rather painted a different color.

Each player has between 5 and 10 pawns, depending on the variation and desired difficulty of the game. The movement of the pawns was decided by the throw of four two-sided casting sticks (as shown in the Hesy painting) with a mark on one side and blank on the other, or by the casting of knucklebone dice.

What follow are two reconstructions of the rules. Which one is closer to the original (if either) is impossible to say, but both sets of rules are fun to play, and the player is invited to create his own variants of Senet.

The Bell Variant (created by R. C. Bell)

Each player has 10 pawns. At the beginning of the game there are no pawns on the board. Throw the four casting sticks to determine the move: each marked side up counts as one point. If all blank sides come up, it counts as five points.
Each player in turn throws the sticks and puts his pawns on the board in squares 30, 29, 28, 27, and 26 according to the number of points thrown (1 point means put a pawn in Square 30, 2 points, Square 29, etc.). Only one pawn may be placed in each square; if there is already a pawn in that square, the turn is wasted.

After the five squares are filled, the game begins. In turn, each player throws the sticks and can either move one of his pawns that number of spaces up the board, or place a new pawn in one of the five symbol squares (Squares 26-30) if any are empty.

If a pawn is moved to a square already occupied by an opponent's pawn, the opponent's pawn is removed and must start over at the beginning. This does not apply to the five symbol squares. Any number of pawns may be moved to them, but they may only be placed in empty squares.

The player who manages to get a pawn to Square 1 earns a bonus of five points. That player must now try to get all of his pawns to the odd-numbered squares on the first two rows before his opponent can move all of his pawns to even-numbered squares. When a pawn has reached its finishing square, it is "locked" and cannot be landed on, though it may be moved through by other pawns.

The first player to move all of his pawns to his own squares wins the game and earns 10 points. He gets an additional point for each move his opponent makes while placing all of his remaining pawns.

The Kendall Variant (created by Timothy Kendall)

The winner is the first player to move all his pawns off the board.

Each player receives seven pawns. The pawns of both players alternate along squares 1-14. The fifteenth square is treated as the starting square. Throw the four casting sticks to determine the move: each blank side up counts as one point. If all four marked sides come up, it counts as five points. Move one of your pawns a number of squares equal to the number of points you "rolled."

If a pawn is moved to a square occupied by an opponent’s pawn, the moving pawn is placed in that square and the opponent’s pawn is placed in the square that pawn started the move from.
Certain squares have special effects on play:

The House of Rebirth - the starting square and the square pawns return to when landing on The House of Water.

The House of Happiness - all pawns finish a move here, even if they threw enough to move past it.

The House of Water - any pawn finishing a move on this square must go back to The House of Rebirth.

House of the Three Truths - a pawn landing here may only leave the board if a three is thrown.

House of Re-Atoum - a pawn landing here may only leave the board if a two is thrown.

The following is a very nice article on how to play Senet:

**The Game of Senet**

Senet is an Egyptian race game and may be the ancestor of our modern backgammon. We know of this game through ancient Egyptian boards that have survived to this day. More than 40 have been discovered, some in very good condition with pawns, sticks or knucklebones still intact. The oldest known representation of Senet is in a painting from the tomb of Hesy (Third Dynasty circa 2686-2613 BCE).

The game board is composed of 30 squares: 3 rows of 10 squares each. If we number each square, the board can be represented like this:

1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9 10  
20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11  
21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30  

The path of the pawns probably followed a reversed S across the board.

Squares 26 to 30 have symbols on them. We will represent them in order by X, O, III, II and I. It seems that the square with an X, carrying the sign nfr, was beneficial, whereas the one with an O, associated with water, had a negative meaning. Square 15, also called the "square of Rebirth," might have been the starting square.

Other elements found with the gameboards were pawns. The Hesy painting shows a game with seven pawns for each player. Then, some time after 1600 - 1500 BCE, the
players were represented with seven or five pawns. Some games have even been found with ten pawns per player.

The movement of pawns was probably decided by the throw of four, two-sided sticks (as depicted in the Hesy painting) or, later, knucklebones might have been used to determine the moves.

What was the function of Senet? A game or something more? In his book, Lhôte notices that the first pictures show two human players whereas later the human player is depicted alone with an invisible opponent. It appears that Senet began as a simple game and later acquired a symbolic, ritual function.

Of course, the original rules of Senet are not known. No record of the rules on papyrus or tomb wall has ever been discovered. It is very difficult to reconstruct the game through the pieces and the tomb images.

Kendall's Rules

A summary of Timothy Kendall’s work on the reconstruction of the rules of Senet is given in the book by Lhôte.

1. At the beginning of the game the seven pawns per player alternate along the 14 first squares. The starting square is counted as the 15th. In the oldest games this square featured an ankh, a "life" symbol. The pawns move according to the throw of four sticks or, later, one or two knucklebones. When using the sticks the points seemed to have been counted from 1 to 5: 1 point for each side without a mark and 5 points if the four marked sides were present together.

2. When a pawn reached a square already occupied by an opponent pawn, they have to exchange their positions.

3. The special squares have the following effects on play:

   - 15: House of Rebirth, starting square and the return square for the pawns reaching square number 27.
   - 26: House of Happiness, a mandatory square for all the pawns.
   - 27: House of Water, a square that can be reached by the pawns located on squares 28 to 30 which moved back when their throws did not allow them to exit the board. They have to restart from square 15.
   - 28: House of the Three Truths, a pawn may only leave when a 3
is thrown.

- 29 : House of the Re-Atoum, a pawn may only leave when a 2 is thrown.

4. The winner is the first to move all of their pawns off the board.

Bell's Rules

Another version of the rules was proposed by RC Bell.

Each player has 10 pawns. Four two-sided sticks (one side painted) are thrown to determine movement.

- When only one painted side is visible : 1 point.
- With two : 2 points.
- With three : 3 points.
- With four : 4 points.
- With none : 5 points.

1. At the beginning of the game there are no pawns on the board.

2. Each player in turn throws the sticks, and puts his pawns on the board on the squares with the symbols I, II, III, X, O according to the number of points thrown. Only one pawn may be present on each square. So if a pawn is already present the turn is lost.

3. A player may either move one pawn or add a new pawn to the board, if possible, with each throw. The pawns located on the marked squares are in shelters.

4. Pawns may not be stacked. When a pawn arrives on a square already occupied by an opponent pawn, the opponent is removed and must restart from the beginning. This rule does not apply for the marked squares which are shelters.

5. The first pawn to reach square number 1 earns a bonus of five points and it fixes the goal of the game: that player's other pawns have to reach odd squares whereas the opponent must reach the even squares. The game ends when the pawns of the two players are alternately placed on the first and
second rows.

6. When a pawn has reached its last square, it cannot be attacked.

7. The first player to have put all his pawns on his own squares wins the game and earns 10 points. He also gets one point for each move his opponent makes while placing all of his remaining pawns.

8. 

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