

THE ROYAL GAME OF UR

by Damian Walker

Ending the game.

16. The first player whose pieces are all borne off the board has won the game.

Variations

Any form of binary lot may be used in place of tetrahedral dice; coins are the most readily available substitute.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The interested reader can gain more information about the Royal Game of Ur by consulting the following books.

Bell, R. C. *Discovering Old Board Games*, p. 2. Aylesbury: Shire Publications Ltd., 1973.

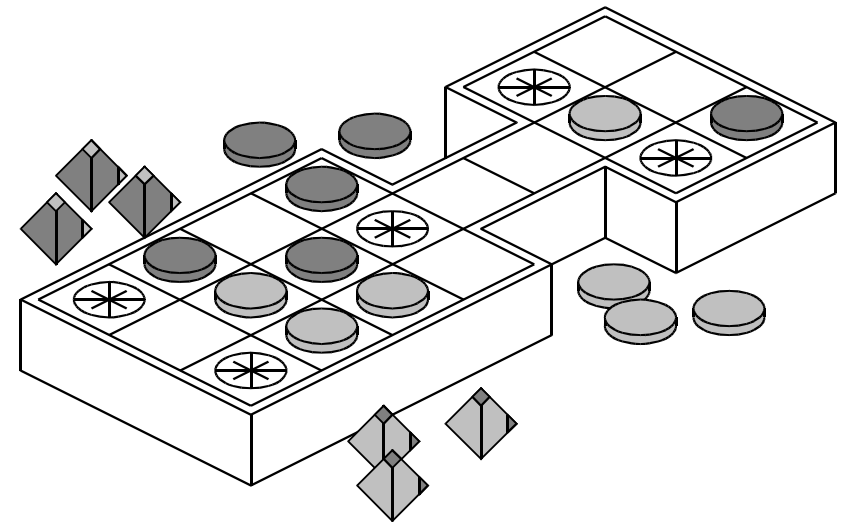
Bell, R. C. *Board and Table Games from Many Civilizations*, vol. 1, pp. 23-25. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1979.

Botermans, J. et al. *The World of Games*, pp. 22-24. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1989.

Murray, H. J. R. *A History of Board-games Other Than Chess*, pp. 19-21. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952.

Parlett, D. *The Oxford History of Board Games*, pp. 63-65. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

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INTRODUCTION & HISTORY

In 1926-7 Sir Leonard Woolley was excavating at the royal tombs in Ur, in modern Iraq, and found among other things the oldest full set of gaming equipment known to exist. This dates from about 2500 BC, comprised a board of twenty squares, two sets of seven pieces, and six dice in the shape of pyramids. The game was afterwards given the name *the Royal Game of Ur*.

Other similar sets were found in the same archaeological dig, some in a less well-preserved state. The games differed in materials and quality of workmanship, but all shared the same layout of squares,

some decorated with rosettes. Decoration on squares without rosettes varied from board to board, and some had delightful animal scenes engraved on them.

No rules were found at the time of the excavation, so a number of different historians and archaeologists devised their own interpretations, and there are versions of this game for sale. In more recent years, an almost complete set of rules on cuneiform tablets has come to light, dating from the second century BC and telling us everything about the game apart from the direction the pieces travelled along the board.

HOW TO PLAY

Complete sets of rules were published by R. C. Bell in his book *Board and Table Games from Many Civilizations*, and by Irving Finkel in his game for the British Museum shop. The set of rules in this leaflet takes elements from these but introduces some ideas by H. J. R. Murray and David Parlett that make the game more logical and elegant.

Beginning the Game

1. The Royal Game of Ur is

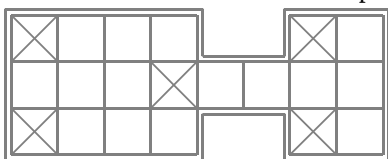


Illustration 1: the empty board. Squares marked with a cross here usually bear a rosette on the ornamented boards.

played on a board of 20 squares, arranged in 3 rows of 8 with four squares cut away (as shown in Illustration 1). Five of the squares are marked. The board can be thought of as in three distinctive sections: a large block, a small block and the *bridge* between them.

2. Each player starts the game with seven pieces in hand, the board being empty.

3. Each player has three binary lots in the form of pyramidal dice

with four corners; two corners are marked. When throwing the dice the score is the number of marked corners pointing upwards, with none signifying a score of four.

4. Players decide at random who begins.

Moving the Pieces

5. The path of a player's pieces starts on his side of the board, in the large block, at the square nearest the bridge. The piece moves toward the corner with the rosette, before moving to the adjacent square on the middle row and continuing till it crosses the bridge. Once across the bridge, it moves to the rosette on the opponent's side, then curves around the small block till reaching the rosette at the player's own side, from which it is borne off. The path is simpler than it sounds: see Illustration 2.

6. In his turn a player first throws his dice.

7. If none of his pieces are in play, then he must enter a piece on the first, second, third or fourth square on the board, according to the score of the dice.

8. If he has pieces already on the board, then in-

stead he may move one of his pieces along its path by the number of squares indicated on the dice.

9. If the score of the dice was four, the player may after moving a piece, roll and move again.

10. A piece must bear off by an exact throw. For example, if a player's piece sits on the final rosette of its path, a 1 is required to bear off; if on the adjacent square, a 2, and so on.

11. Only one of a player's pieces may sit in a square at once; pieces cannot sit together in the same square.

12. If the roll of the dice gives no valid move, then the turn is lost and the opponent's turn begins. In this case no further roll is granted, even if the dice show four.

Catching Enemies

13. If landing on an opponent's piece, that piece is removed from the board and must begin its journey again.

14. A piece sitting on a special marked square is safe; the opponent cannot land on it.

15. The first four squares in a piece's path are also safe, as the opponent's pieces never land there.

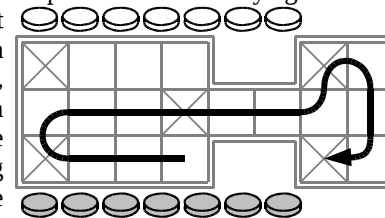


Illustration 2: the direction of travel for the black pieces, shown lined up here before any have entered the board. The path for the white pieces is a mirror image of this, starting and ending on the top row.