

14 Senet: More Than a Game

Many scholars believe that the game of Senet died out after the Roman Empire incorporated Egypt into its territory. However, some believe that the game not only survived, but still thrives in the Middle East and other parts of the world. The modern form of the game is known as Backgammon, a very ancient game that most scholars believe originated in Persia. However, some believe that the Senet Game Board was a precursor to the traditional Backgammon board.

If you look up the word “Backgammon” you will read about something called a “gammon” and something about “back” as aspects of the play of the game. After all, it is a “game” and certainly involved gaming in the form of gambling, and that takes care of the “gammon” part. “Back” is said to refer to the way you can send an opponent’s piece “back” so it has to start its progress over again. I think this is all probably a “back formation”, a linguistic definition made up to fit something that people already see exists. Also it is from English root words, and the game only came to English speaking lands in the 16th or 17th century.

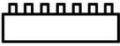
What if the name really is very normal ancient Egyptian and even contains the usual kinds of Egyptian wordplay jokes? Perhaps the resemblance to English words is simply a coincidence. Of course, the resemblance to Egyptian words may also be a coincidence. I can not prove either theory, but Senet goes back well before the 1st dynasty of Egypt and has many features in common with Backgammon. So here is the “evidence”. You decide.

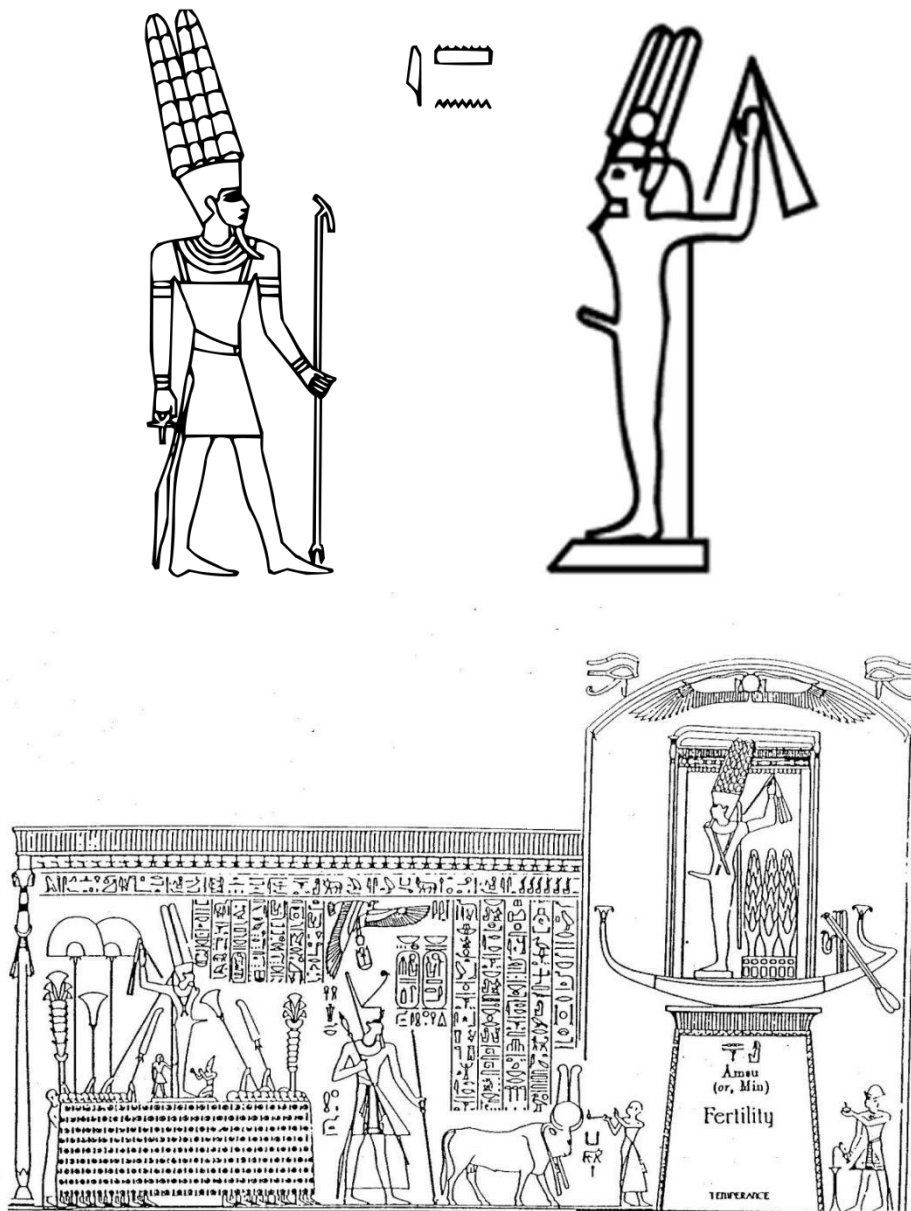
In ancient Egyptian “bak” is a hawk or falcon. This of course calls to mind Horus. However, Egyptians often used the hawk symbol to represent any deity. Also, there is another way to read the word: “ba-k”, which means your soul, your mind, your thought, your breath,

The “gammon” looks suspiciously like the “g” got tacked on because of the “k” followed by an “a” as the word passed on and people forgot its original meaning. That means we have “ammon”, a word that in Egyptian means “hidden”. In ancient Egyptian adjectives follow the noun (or pronoun) that they modify. So we could have “Hidden Hawk”, or “the hawk is hidden”. Or we could have “your hidden soul” or “your

soul is hidden. [Mind, thought, breath, . . .] You can not see the air, but only things that the air blows.

We have already introduced the god Amen [or Amin or Ammon]. This is what he looks like as a creator god. The drawing on the left below is his more regal mode, and the drawing on the right shows him in his primordial mode. The glyphs spelling his name are shown in between the two common renderings of Amen/Amon. The Senet Board glyph

“men”  is clearly visible. He is the main deity of the Theban triad that we see in the temples at Karnak and Luxor. Both depictions can be seen there, and they often alternate from mode to mode.



In the above elaborate drawing we see Amon in his boat placed on a pedestal in a temple, perhaps at Luxor. Behind him is a miniature garden suggesting that he helps the crops grow. On the left priests carry a “float” with the image of Amon on it. If you like to count, there are 22 priests with shaven heads carrying the float, one of whom holds a rod to keep Amon’s image steady. There are also 8 assisting priests carrying flabella and other decorative standards. This means the float has 30 priests involved in transporting it, representing a complete Senet Board with 30 squares. In the middle part of the tableau a priest censes a sacred bull that represents the Ka energy, which is primarily second chakra energy (see the Electric Body card).

We recall that Amen’s name also has two components: A + men. Sometimes the god is simply called Men, but he has other names such as Amsu and Khem. The “a” means something or someone is very precious. The “men” means a foundation.

If the game survived as Backgammon, we should take a look at a modern Backgammon board.



Modern Backgammon Board
Photo: Wikipedia

The board layout has changed quite a bit from the simple Senet board. The squares have become long thin tapering deltas. There are only two rows visible, and each row has 12 deltas instead of 10 squares. In the middle is a space that could play the role of the middle row and the Nile. Players sit on opposite sides and move their pawns around the board, each player going in the opposite direction. It is a race game with the possibility of attacking the opponent’s pawns.

We can image that it originally was two groups of pilgrims visiting temples and holy spots on both sides of the Nile. You can find out

more details about the current Backgammon game on the Internet or buy a game at a store and play with a friend. In a later article I will explain how you can “restore” the game to its original smaller size and play Backgammon as we do today on a Senet Oracle Board that you make or by using the printed Oracle Board poster. It brings the game back to a feel for ancient Egypt. You must use the Oracle Board layout, or you can design your own version.

The tall sharp deltas are exaggerated versions of an Egyptian glyph that means “to give”. Pilgrims in ancient Egypt would visit the temples and leave donations at each one.

14 Study Questions

- * Senet may have been a precursor to what modern popular board game?
- * Discuss what ancient Egyptian words could actually be the origin of the name of that game?
- * Why would this be of interest, both for the study of the Senet Oracle Game Boards and for understanding Egyptian civilization?
- * What is the imagined real life scenario that could be part of the “game”?
- * What is the possible meaning of the long triangles that have replaced squares on the board?
- * Why do you think they are long and thin?
- * Although the ideas presented in this article may be speculative, describe how they derive from the deep wisdom tradition of ancient Egypt and deepen our understanding of Senet as a game and as an oracle.
- * What does this theory of the Senet game have to do with the Series Overview?

Option: Jump ahead to the article on playing Backgammon on a Senet Oracle Board and experiment by playing the game in that way.