

Backgammon is one of the oldest board games known

Mar 12, 2016 Ian Smith, writer for The Vintage News



Backgammon has evolved over thousands of years into the game we play today. It is thought that it originated in Egypt as something called “Senet”, or the game of thirty squares. It was played with dice on a board that had squares in a pattern of three lots of ten.

This game of Senet dates back to at least 3,000 BC; the rules for playing that very ancient game have now been lost in time. Backgammon has often been associated with aristocracy and the rights of the ruling class throughout history.

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Senet, one of the oldest known board games

The oldest version of backgammon that archaeologists have uncovered so far is from the Iranian city of Shar-e Sukhteh; its board and markers have been dated to 3,000 BC. The board is rectangular and made of ebony – illustrated with an engraving of a snake. The serpent is coiled around itself twenty times, and this creates 20 slots for the game (today’s version has 24). Markers found with the game were made from turquoise and agate, and sixty of them were discovered along with the dice. Wooden boards have been found in the royal tomb of the “Ur al Chaldees” in the center of Sumer, but these were dated to only 2600 BC and are known as “The Royal Games of Ur”.



Tables players, from the Carmina Burana

“Ludas Duodecim Scriptorum”, a Roman game, is thought to descend from Senet. It’s played on a board of 3 x 12 rows of points. The game was altered around the 1st century AD, and it lost a row of points. It continued to evolve, and by the 6th century it was known as “Alea”. Emperor Claudius was said to have enjoyed this game so much that he had a board built into his carriage.

In Asia, the game was first referred to in 800 AD Persia, and is still popular to this day as “Nard”. Chinese history claims that the game called “T’Shu-P’u (the Chinese name for Nard) first came from India before it was imported into China in 220-265 AD during the Wei dynasty. The game was also found in Japan, where it was called Sugoroko. It was so popular that it was banned in the reign of the Japanese Empress Jito in 690-697 AD for creating gambling issues.

The Romans and the English banned it for the same reason at different periods of time. The Arab invasion of Sicily in 902 AD is thought by researchers to have introduced the game of Nard into Europe. Documentation of the game being played in England didn’t appear until 1025 AD when a game called “tables” was referred to in *The Codex Exoniensis*.

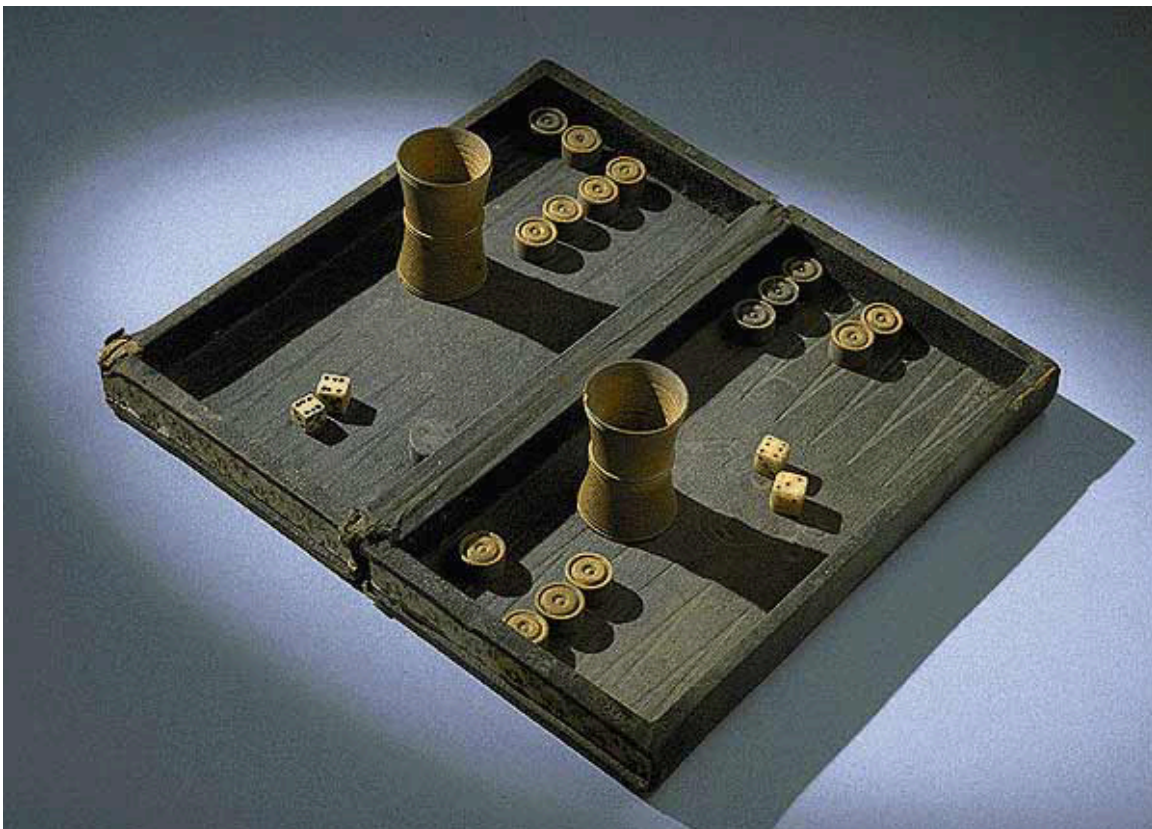
It’s thought that the game made its way to England via the Knights returning from the Crusades. It was played not only by the noble classes by the time of the Crusades but was also found in taverns and private homes. Chess eventually overtook the game in popularity.



All tables from the Book of Games

In 1743, Edmund Hoyle, who wrote “proper” rules for many board and playing card games, published the first official rules for backgammon. Over the years the game has waxed and waned in popularity.

The First World War made it popular again, and later in the 1970s it again resurfaced as the board game of choice. The rules that were revised and written in the United States in 1931 are considered the proper rules for the game that is played today.



Backgammon set, 19th century

So how do you play this game? It's not that hard. You need a backgammon board, thirty checkers in black and white (15 of each color) and two dice. On the board are twenty-four narrow triangles that alternate in color and are called "points". The board is separated into two outer boards and two home boards – one for each player.

The points are numbered from low to high on each of the player's home boards. There are set places where playing pieces start, and the pieces are moved according to the roll of the dice. To win the game, you need to successfully move all your pieces onto the home board before your opponent does. There are many sites and books you can refer to that will help you learn how to play.



Herr Goeli, from the 14th century Codex Manesse

Backgammon is not only simple to play but, depending on skill and luck, the game can last a while. It is a game of strategies, and your play improves as you practice. It can take many years to master the game and all its nuances.

There are many competitions and tournaments held around the world, and this game can also be played online. Once you get used to playing by the basic rules, there are more advanced rules that involve gammons and doubling in the game. The board can be handmade or commercially made; you can purchase cheap sets all the way up to ones worth thousands of dollars and made out of materials such as marble.