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**PASTIMES IN THE LIFE OF A CASTLE.  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCES OF  
THE MILL GAME IN SOUTHERN ITALY**

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## Abstract

Of ancient origins, mill game mainly underwent a noticeable development in Medieval Europe. Thanks to its persistence and success during the centuries, this game can be considered the forerunner of many modern pastimes. The popularity of mill game can be founded in the abundance of material evidences referring to the game that were discovered over the past decades in European cities contexts and sites of various typology. There appears to be no doubt regarding its use as a pastime and as a recreational moment typical of different social classes and categories, even though the majority of the existing pictorial representations depicts higher classes members playing the mill game. Proven evidence are the numerous artifacts referred to the mill game in Southern Italy castles, particularly in the towers of Campania region inland settlements, whose recent findings will be displayed in this essay.

### Keywords:

Southern Italy, medieval archaeology, mill game, medieval pastimes, castles

## Resum

D'origen antic, el joc del molí va experimentar un desenvolupament notable principalment a l'Europa medieval. Gràcies a la seva persistència i èxit durant els segles, aquest joc es pot considerar el precursor de molts passatempers moderns. La popularitat del joc del molí es basa en l'abundància d'evidències materials referents al joc que es van descobrir durant les últimes dècades en contextos de ciutats europees i jaciments de diversa tipologia. Sembla que no hi ha cap dubte sobre el seu ús com a passatempers ni del seu ús recreatiu propi de diferents classes i categories socials, tot i que la majoria de les representacions pictòriques existents representen membres de classes més altes jugant al joc del molí. Evidència provada són els nombrosos artefactes referits al joc del molí als castells del sud d'Itàlia, especialment a les torres dels assentaments de l'interior de la regió de Campània, aquestes troballes recents són les que es mostraran en aquest article.

### Paraules clau:

sud d'Itàlia, arqueologia medieval, joc del molí, passatempers medievals, castells

## Introduction

The mill game, a pastime of ancient origin, was widely spread not only in European contexts but also in further areas. Despite this, it was known to have had a major development mostly in medieval Europe<sup>1</sup>. Game boards engraved on stone or on other materials, pictorial representations, and mentions in written documentation testify the popularity achieved by the mill game over the centuries.

The popularity of this game was also due to the easy creation of the grid made by three squares with four or six lines converging towards the centre, with the use of pieces of different nature (cobblestones, pieces of bricks) and the simplicity of the game itself. The praise that the mill game received through the years made the game become the forerunner of lots of modern pastimes and thus made it known everywhere.

The proof of this is in the many testimonies about this game that can be found in written sources and in art. The evidence that the mill game, or a variant of it, was known and diffused in the Roman times, and it is contained in a passage of Ovid's *Ars amatoria* where it is mentioned a '*parva tabella capit ternos ultimque lapillos / in qua vicisse est continuasse suos*' (OVID: III, 365-366). The Ovid's passage attests the importance of board games, as in the epigram by Marziale with the significant title *Tabula lusoria* (MARZIALE: XIV, 17). *Tabulae lusoriae* were the topic of a law of Republican age, the so-called *Lex alearia*<sup>2</sup>, which prohibited gambling and some other games one of which was a variant of the mill game.

The documents that mentioned the mill game became more frequent since the late Middle Ages. A famous example is represented by the *Libro de los juegos*, an essay composed in 1283 under the rule of King Alfonso X of Castile (ALFONSO X EL SABIO 1996), which forms one of the most important and complete testimonies of pastimes in Spain and in medieval Europe. The treatise was focused entirely on board games with dice: the descriptions are accompanied by miniatures, just like the mill game and its variants, which facilitate the learning of the rules.

Recurring representations of the game are visible on frescoes or paintings that reproduce moments of the daily life: in the Italian area (Figure 1) we cannot omit to mention the frescoes in the castles of Arco, in the province of Trento (DEGLI AVANCINI 2002: 300), and in the fortress of Issogne in Valle d'Aosta (GABRIELLI 1959; GRISERI 1971).

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1. Cf. MEHL 1990; DOSSENA 1999; VAN DER STOEP, DE RUITER, VAN MOURIK 2021.

2. See, from a legal point of view, GOMEZ 2002.

Comparing the two pictorial cycles<sup>3</sup>, the mill game emerges as a pastime not just for the lower classes: on the paintings of the Challant fortress of Issogne the soldiers are represented in the act of playing, in the fortified structure in Trento the game<sup>4</sup> is played by high class figures<sup>5</sup>.

The information obtained from the pictorial representations represent the proof of the success of the mill game and how it was widely spread between the Italian social classes and European alike<sup>6</sup>.

## Archaeology of mill game in Southern Italy

The material documentation gets richer and more complete with the data coming from archaeological investigations that often provide us with information related to games and pastimes.

Leaving aside the many attestations of the game in the Roman times<sup>7</sup>, most of the data that we have comes from the Middle Ages (BIANCHI 2002: 461).

The material evidences are established mainly of board games that were incised on stone elements often located in the most frequented buildings and places (NUZZO 2018: 188). Grids of the mill game engraved on stone elements referable to steps, thresholds or any architectural horizontal elements were afterwards decontextualized and reused in the masonry of other types of buildings, often with singular outcomes. This form of reuse made the characteristic grid of the mill game assume a symbolic function, but also a religious and esoteric one<sup>8</sup>.

The position of the boards shows how the game was widely practiced in squares<sup>9</sup>, churches, monasteries, and castles. As an example, boards of the mill game incised on stone were found inside the inter-columns in the cloister of San Paolo Fuori le Mura church in Rome (BRUNO 2009: 628).

It is to be noted the unusual presence of boards engraved of the mill game on grave slabs inside churches. In some cases, we can talk about reused slabs, while in

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3. The first one dates back to the XIV century, while the second between the end of XV century and the first years of the next century.

4. On the frescoes of the castle of Arco, like the ones of Issogne, different characters are depicted while playing not just with the mill game, but also with other board games.

5. The mill game was appreciated by the wealthy classes; GUARDUCCI 1986.

6. It is no coincidence that the mill game was chosen by the artists as a characterizing and essential element in the representation of scenes of everyday life.

7. As an example, several game tables are kept in the Galleria Lapidaria inside the Capitolini Museum in Rome, which are engraved on stone; SALZA PRINA RICOTTI 1995.

8. Overlooking the uncertain religious and esoteric nature, the grid of the mill game was used as a decorative symbol: we can find it in association with other symbols on architraves, as in the case of Sant'Andrea in Pratale church (Figure 1), in the territory of Pistoia (Tuscany).

9. Despite the numerous prohibitions enforced in many European cities that banned games in open spaces; BELCARI 2015: 138.

other situations (VITALE 2009: 93) it is possible to believe that they were actually used for playing and that the worship places constituted real sites of aggregation for the population (GRAVILLI 1999: 46)<sup>10</sup>.

As previously mentioned, the mill game, with other hobbies such as the backgammon, chess, checkers, and *alquerque*, was widespread in castles and in fortified structures: they are often found in places where garrisons were based. As a matter of fact discoveries of dice and pieces are always more frequent from archaeological investigations inside fortified structures.

Research carried out in southern Italy during the last few decades in castles, towers and urban settlements have allowed the recovery of abundant material data and information related to the hobbies that were popular between the Middle Ages and the Modern period.

Nevertheless, the study of objects related to ludic activities is still in an embryonic phase and lacks of systematic researches; such artifacts appear to be underestimated with the risk of not being well interpreted for what they really represent.

The pieces are included in such category of archaeological findings: unlike the pawns of chess that had well-defined shapes, the conformation of the pieces of the mill game and other similar games were surely round and were made of bone, terracotta or reused fragments of objects that got reshaped, for example pottery vessels.

The custom of using waste material for pieces represents a further indication of the popularity that this game enjoyed among the different social classes. Terracotta pieces have been found in different fortified settlements (BRUNO 2009: 629).

The discoveries from the castle of Lagopesole (Figure 1), in Basilicata, which are of Angevin period (GIOVANNUCCI, PEDUTO 2000: 35), and from the fortress of San Niceto (Figure 1), in the province of Reggio Calabria (COSCARELLA 2004), are worth mentioning.

A rather homogeneous group of fifty-eight pieces datable between the end of XIII and the beginning of the following century (BRUNO 2009: 625-626) emerged from the archaeological excavation of a garbage dump from the castle of San Niceto. Made with reused materials, or with potsherds of different types and coating, the pieces were probably stored, along with a bone dice, in a wooden box (of which two iron fasteners were found), as it was thrown into the garbage because it was no longer usable. It has been hypothesized that they were used for the backgammon or for the mill game because of the type of these pieces and because of the presence of the dice; the dice could refer to a variant of the mill game (SCHÄDLER 2000: 112-116).

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10. However, in this regard opposing opinions affirm that such games of ingenuity, like the mill game and checkers, were more tolerated compared to other hobbies (which could lead to gambling more easily) as long as they were practiced far from churches and cemeteries; BELCARI 2015: 138; RIZZI 1995: 57-59, 63-64.

Similar pieces, both in terracotta and bronze, were also found in the castle of Sciacca (Figure 1), in Sicily (CAMINNECI, RIZZO 2012a; 2012b: 133-141), and in the settlement of Apigliano (Figure 1), province of Lecce (VITALE 2009: 93).

The large number of game boards' finds in fortified settlements is due to the reuse of blocks of stone on which they were engraved in the brickwork of posterior structures.

## **New discoveries from Cerreto Sannita archaeological investigations**

The archaeological investigations carried out in recent years inside the fortified settlements of southern Italy led to the discovery of numerous game boards: in the case of the Norman tower in the old abandoned town of Cerreto Sannita (Figure 1), the excavations found three tables of the mill game engraved on three different supports. Razed to the ground by the earthquake of June 1688 that devastated part of the province of Benevento, the settlement of Cerreto Sannita was completely rebuilt on the hill underlying the old town mentioned for the first time in the X century (ROTILI, CATALDO 2015). Between 2012 and 2015 archaeological researches explored the central portion of the old Cerreto (Figure 2), where there are mighty remains of the XII-XIII century *Magna turris* (ROTILI, LONARDO 2018; LONARDO 2020). The studies provide numerous data concerning the life stages of the settlement and the everyday life of the local community between the Middle Ages and the early Modern period.

The *Magna turris* of Cerreto Sannita (Figure 3) is a structure made up of four or five levels that in origin was thirty meters (98 feet) tall, with thickness of the walls ranging between 3,20 and 3,95 meters (10-13 feet). The tower falls within the broad casuistry of *donjon residentiel*, a model of Norman residential tower well known in Europe (ROTILI 2011: 94-95).

The archaeological excavation highlighted several alterations and the change of use of the tower (LONARDO 2020: 57-58), which included the conversion of the foreground in a jail cell. The removal of the collapsed layers from the inside of the tower, besides returning potsherds, glass and metal artifacts, led to the discovery of numerous stone elements of different types which were relevant to the masonry of the building. Three fragments (Figure 4) are characterized by the presence of the grid of the mill game: the first find is a big fragment of an *opus signinum* paving of the upper floors of the tower; the second is a fragment of a limestone threshold, while the third is a square block of grey tuff. The game boards had been engraved with a tool with a metallic tip and are of a square form with the side measure between seventeen to twenty-nine centimetres (6-11 inches). The discoveries of the tower of Cerreto, seen in relation with the possible presence of guards on the upper floor of the prison cell, show further evidence of the success of this hobby among

the soldiers who apparently preferred this game to others. It is remarkable the absence in Cerreto of other board games (backgammon, *alquerque*), that usually were found in other fortified contexts along with the grids of the mill game. However, the only presence of the mill game was detected also in other fortified structures of the same territory: for example, in the castle of Campolattaro<sup>11</sup> (Figures 1, 5) and inside the Rocca dei Rettori in Benevento (Figures 1, 6).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, although nowadays the mill game is a niche hobby on the brink of oblivion, it can be considered one of the most practiced games between the Middle Ages and the Modern period and probably the most loved pastime among soldiers, as testified by the archaeological data mentioned above.

Its fortune and popularity were due not only to the easy rules and the simplicity in making pieces and crafting the game board, but also because it was a game of ingenuity that could often lead to gambling.

For this reason, material traces of the game are frequently found in castles and cities, in particular in fortified settlements of southern Italy where recent archaeological investigations have brought new and interesting data on daily life and popular hobbies.

It is hoped that in the future more archaeological data will provide us with systematic studies and a chrono-typological materials sequence; this would allow us to give back to those objects the importance that they had in the societies of the past.

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11. Another example of a mill table is visible on a step of a house in the old town of Campolattaro.

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**Figures**



Fig. 1. The sites mentioned in the paper. (L. Lonardo private archive)



Fig. 2. Old Cerreto Sannita. The area of 2012-2015 excavations. (M. Rotili private archive)



Fig. 3. Old Cerreto Sannita. The Magna turris. (Photo by L. Lonardo)



Fig. 4. Mill game boards from Magna turris excavation. (Photo by L. Lonardo)



Fig. 5. The castle of Campolattaro (left) and mill game board (right). (Photo by L. Lonardo)



Fig. 6. The Rocca dei Rettori in Benevento (left) and mill game board (right). (Photo by L. Lonardo)