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When Games get Lost: On the Disappearance of the Ancient Egyptian Board Game *Mehen*¹

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Abstract

The late fourth and early third millennium BC saw the rise in popularity of the *mehen* board game in Ancient Egypt. Its circular shaped game board with its characteristic coiled serpent as spatial game design appeared in a number of royal burial contexts, and also in inscriptions and wall paintings. A visible decline of *mehen*'s popularity can be observed in the mid-3rd millennium BC, leading ultimately to the total disappearance from the material culture of the Egyptians in the late third millennium. It is argued that the disappearance of *mehen* can be better understood by utilising Assmann's cultural memory theory. This study presents a concise material biography of *mehen*. Moreover, Assmann's cultural memory is introduced as theoretical apparatus through which *mehen*'s transformations in material culture and representation are analysed. The conclusion regards *mehen*'s disappearance as a result of *mehen*'s fading role as object for establishing social identity.

Keywords: *mehen*; cultural memory; ancient board games; egyptian archaeology; theoretical archaeology

Introduction

*Mehen*² is arguably one of the first consistent and reproduced board games in human history (Ranke, 1920; Piccione, 1990; Rothöhler, 1999; Kendall, 2007; Crist *et al*, 2016). This iconic game board, in the form of a coiled serpent as a playing field, appears in the late fourth millennium BCE as a vessel lid (Petrie & Quibell, 1896, p. 14). Relatively rapidly after, *mehen* develops into a *standardised*³ board game containing distinct playing pieces (Kendall, 2007, pp. 34–35). These have frequented Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom tombs of pharaohs and elites in the form of actual board game sets, wall paintings, listings or

¹ This paper is a revised, condensed and updated version of my BA thesis called «Mehen and Cultural Memory: Incorporating, Maintaining and Obliviating a Board Game Practice in Ancient Egypt» (2020).

² If *Mehen* is in italics it indicates the board game practice, if not and capitalised the serpent deity Mehen is meant.

³ *Standardised* means here a game that has reached a level of visible conventions (i.e., appearance of board and figures)

reliefs. The end of the Old Kingdom is, however, also the end of *mehen*. Thus, the game disappears from the cultural memory of the Egyptians and the archaeological records (Crist *et al*, 2016, p. 32).

Millenia later, *mehen* steps back into the light during the late 19th and early 20th century (Petrie & Quibell, 1896; Petrie, 1914). What was once in practice has turned into an artefact which would undergo in-depth studies. The game and its handful of excavated (or, under dubious circumstances, acquired) specimens were of obvious interest from a ludic perspective. The rules were not preserved, and many theories emerged as to how the game was played (Ranke, 1920; Montet, 1955; Kyppö, 2018). Yet another focal point of interest was *mehen*'s cultural and religious connotations (Ranke, 1920; Piccione, 1990; Rothöhler, 1999). What did the game represent? What did it mean to the Egyptians? Did *mehen* have a ritual function? Extensive theories exist on these topics, but none have satisfyingly addressed the questions which still remain open.

Why did *mehen* disappear? Why does a game, so popular among pharaohs and elites, that regarded the game for generations as so vital that they would want to take it with them to their afterlives, vanish? Scholars have often argued that the game's disappearance is grounded in the decline and end of the Old Kingdom (Ranke, 1920; Kendal, 2007). Others point towards the rising popularity of the board game *senet* during that time (Rothöhler, 1999; Crist *et al*, 2016). While these events cannot be regarded as mere coincidences, I argue that they also cannot be the sole reason for the literal obliteration of *mehen* from Egyptian culture. It is strange to think about the legitimate successor of the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom and their attempts to reintroduce the practices and culture of their predecessors, and to omit *mehen* for no specific reason.

On the other hand, extensive material and anthropological research shows that boardgames do not simply vanish from the face of the earth (Widura, 2015, p. 56). Popular board games are usually reproduced and spread within and outside of their culture, and that cross-demographically (Falkener, 1892; cf. Köhler, 2017; Crist *et al*, 2016). That is why many ancient board games exist in graffiti form as well. *Mehen* appears, however, only in prestigious form and context in Egypt. No graffiti exhibiting traits of *mehen* have been ever discovered (Crist *et al*, 2016, p. 32). This would indicate that the game was unpopular, but why then was it seemingly promoted and apparently celebrated within the Egyptian material culture of the Early Dynastic Period and the Old Kingdom?

I believe an answer to this riddle can be given if we regard *mehen* less as a board game but more as an actual cultural practice. If we take a look at what the game meant socially to the Egyptians, we might be able to recognise details that were overseen by research that was centred on its ludic or religious functions.

Jan Assmann's Cultural Memory theory offers many perspectives on the fundamental functions of cultural practices (1992/2011). Cultural Memory Theory explains how and why

practices are introduced into cultural canons, how they are maintained, strengthened or modified, and how and why some practices are removed from them.

Utilising Assmann's concept of cultural memory as a theoretical apparatus allows us to take a unique look at the biography of *mehen* as a cultural practice and also enables us to interpret transformations within the material record of *mehen* as cultural shifts with social purposes. Suppose we gain a new perspective on how and why *mehen* was introduced to the cultural memory of Egyptian society: in such a case, we eventually gain a useful perspective on why the practice was abandoned or, rather, deliberately expelled. Understanding the mechanisms behind the incorporation, maintenance and obliteration of cultural practices within a society might give us a more profound understanding of *mehen's* disappearance, and that understanding might offer itself to comparison with other cases.

My essay intends to tackle the disappearance of *mehen* in looking at its archaeological record through the lens of Assmann's cultural memory theory. In order to do so I shall introduce *mehen* as board game practice based on its essential material characteristics. Further, I will provide a material biography of *mehen* grounded in a chronological overview and categorisation of different *mehen* styles and forms of representation attested throughout the Early Dynastic Period and the Old Kingdom. I will then present the cultural memory theory by Jan Assmann as theoretical apparatus. I will focus primarily on the aspects of identity and canonisation that encompass the operations of incorporation, maintenance, and expulsion of cultural practices from a social body. Further, I will analyse both accounts with the aid of historical perspectives from the Predynastic, Dynastic and Old Kingdom epochs.

Mehen

Mehen is an ancient Egyptian board game which was already being played at least in the Predynastic Period (Kendall, 2007, p. 35). It consists of a circular board with a spiral pattern as the racetrack (see Figure 1), zoomorphic playing figures, and marbles (Shore, 1963, pp. 88–99). Even though not secured or decisively known, it is argued that *mehen* was a multiplayer race game with strategic elements (Kendall, 2007, p. 35). The absence of randomising agents suggests a rather pure strategy game (Junker 1940, p. 37; Crist *et al*, 2016, p. 25). There are theories as to how the game may have been played, but that discussion would exceed the scope of this study.



Figure 1 Replica of an Early Dynastic board, exhibited in the Neues Museum, Berlin (please note that the playing pieces in the picture are not part of a genuine mehen set) © B. Hanussek

However, *mehen* seems to embody a strong religious aspect. It is suggested that the game is an exemplification of a ritual of resurrection. This ritual aspect is based on the game's similarities with religious counterparts as the protective serpent deity, Mehen.

According to the Book of Amduat, the Book of Gates, and the Book of Night, Mehen ostensibly is an immense coiled serpent who stands on the night-bark of Ra, and he guides the passage of the sun-god in his netherworld journey. Primarily, though, he encompasses Ra in his many coils, and protects him from all outside evil. (Piccione, 1990, p. 43)

Mehen's archaeological record consists essentially of boards, pieces and depictions in between the Predynastic Period and the Old Kingdom. There are atypical boards that deserve attention, but they also exceed the scope and argument of this paper.

Boards⁴

The corpus of a *mehen* set is its board. Game boards are used to designate a consecrated spot, in Johan Huizinga's words, they delineate a playground with special rules "dedicated to the performance of an act apart" of the ordinary world (Huizinga, 1937/2012, p. 10). These *mehen* boards do contain spatial patterns that constitute their game design. Specified spatial patterns in games express agency on the player. Space both limits and enables the player to specific ways of interaction with the board (Kyppö, 2019, p. 15). In elaborated or sophisticated board games, we can trace coherent mathematical and geometrical principles that enable games to be balanced, enabling all players equal chances of winning a game. Board games are any "that can be played on a flat surface such as a table or floor" (Parlett, 2018, p. 5). This means that board games do not have to have an elaborate board to be played; thus, board games can be carved into pavements or stone blocks and appear numerously as graffiti in archaeological contexts (Widura 2015, p. 56). Yet, *mehen* boards appear exclusively on elaborated boards of various materials such as sandstone, limestone, or faience (see Figure 2). About 14 boards have been recorded and identified as *mehen* boards and can be categorised into *Predynastic/Early Dynastic Boards*, *Old Kingdom Boards* and atypical boards (which are, as previously noted, omitted from the present discussion).

⁴ Due to copyright reasons this article cannot be fully illustrated. A complete and illustrated catalogue of all relevant *mehen* boards can be found here: https://www.academia.edu/43745367/Mehen_and_the_Cultural_Memory_Incorporating_Maintaining_and_Obliviating_a_Board_Game_Practice_in_Ancient_Egypt



Figure 2 Peribsen's mehen board made out of faience, displayed in the Louvre, Paris © B.Hanussek

Most boards identified as *mehen* boards are chronologically located between the late Predynastic and Early Dynastic Period. During this span we can see an earlier style characteristic for its protrusion (named "Zapfen" by Ranke) perforation, and clearly identifiable spiral racetrack. A later type appears in the Second and Third Dynasty and is characterised by its checkerboard style, which has an abstract spiral racetrack compared to the protrusion type. All boards are similar in size but have varying numbers of slots within their racetrack. In all cases it is reasonable to assume that the boards were used only as grave goods and not played (Kendall 2007, p. 40).

The term *Old Kingdom Boards* must be treated carefully because all four *mehen* boards assigned to this category have no archaeological context⁵. Characteristic for these boards is their display of outstanding skill in craftsmanship compared to the *Predynastic/Early Dynastic Boards* (Kendall 2007). *Old Kingdom Boards* exhibit great symmetrical proportions, details and decorations. Another characteristic is that all boards are extremely flat and have what seems to be a pair of two eyes on the serpent's head. A further defining feature found on

⁵ Each of all four *Old Kingdom Boards* is located in the Louvre, the Oriental Institute Museum in Chicago, the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden

each of these boards is a goose head that protrudes from an edge of the board, which is a recurring artistic feature from the Old Kingdom (Romilio, 2021). The Old Kingdom provided extraordinary quality standards for art and architecture. Compared to the artistic works of the preceding Early Dynastic Period and the succeeding First Intermediate Period, assigning these four *mehen* boards to the period of the Old Kingdom (i.e. Third – Sixth Dynasty) is reasonable.

Playing Pieces⁶

Mehen was most likely played with marbles that may have acted as counters, and with groups of zoomorphic playing figures, which can be classified as pieces (see Figure 3). No randomising agents have been identified within the context of *mehen*, which might suggest that it “was less likely to have been a race game but may have been some kind of strategy game instead” (Crist *et al* 2016, p. 25).

⁶ Examples of playing pieces can be found within my thesis catalogue: https://www.academia.edu/43745367/Mehen_and_the_Cultural_Memory_Incorporating_Maintaining_and_Obliviating_a_Board_Game_Practice_in_Ancient_Egypt



Figure 3 A complete mehen set displayed at The British Museum, London (lower left corner: marbles; centre board; centre left: playing figures; upper right corner: depiction of playing pieces) © B. Hanussek

Depictions⁷

A major source of information on *mehen* and its sociocultural context comes from depictions. Depictions of *mehen* boards themselves and playing scenes of *mehen* appear from

⁷ A complete and illustrated catalogue of all relevant *mehen* depictions can be found here: https://www.academia.edu/43745367/Mehen_and_the_Cultural_Memory_Incorporating_Maintaining_and_Obliviating_a_Board_Game_Practice_in_Ancient_Egypt

the Third Dynasty onwards. There are votive set depictions, of which only one is preserved, and five other depictions of so-called playing scenes. “These scenes typically show two men sitting opposite each other across the mehen board, with the board shown as it is seen from above” (Crist *et al* 2016). All of these playing scenes appear in noble tombs within the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties.

Hesry-Re’s Wallpainting

The wall painting, in Hesry-Re’s Old Kingdom (Third Dynasty) tomb at Saqqara, contains three complete sets of contemporary Egyptian board games, namely, *senet*, *mehen* and *men*. According to the dimensions, the games seem to be depicted in life-size. The mehen board is about 38 cm in diameter and has a clear spiralled racetrack in the form of a coiled serpent with about 400 identifiable playing fields. The tail and head of the snake are decorated with wavy stripes, possibly indicating wood. The board has a large trapezoidal appendage protruding from the right edge of the board. The appendage has been subject to long debate in which some scholars claimed it to be a foot of the game itself (Montet 1952) while others support the idea of it being a “garage” for the playing pieces (Swiny 1986, p. 56). On the right side of the board a set of playing pieces is depicted. The set contains six lion pieces of which half are male and half female, together with 36 marble counters grouped into units of six. The set is enclosed by box made of ebony. Ebony is indicated by the brown and black swirly stripes, which also appear on the tail and head of the *mehen* board. This depiction is the only evidence for a complete *mehen* set.

Rashepses’ Playing Scene

This depiction exists twice in a Fifth Dynasty tomb at Saqqara (Crist *et al* 2016, p. 28). A group of two players are sitting and playing at a *mehen* board which resembles the board depicted in Hesry-Re’s wall painting. A large trapezoidal protrusion emerges from the upper edge of the board. The players are moving marble counters on the board. Two spectators are surrounding the players. The scene is entitled “playing *mehen*” in hieroglyphic script. The scene is placed on a panel within which a group of *senet* players is also depicted. The whole relief belongs to a so-called banquet scene. The players of the game seem to represent men of the household.

Idu’s Playing Scene

In Idu’s Sixth Dynasty tomb at Giza, a pair of *mehen* players sit enclosed by two other pairs of *senet* players. The two *mehen* players are moving tooth-like shaped figures on the board. The board has no significant details, but a trapezoidal protrusion emerges from the lower edge of the board. The board is enclosed by a rectangular application, outlining a wooden table (Kendall 2007, p. 40). The scene is entitled, “I am playing *mehen* against you” (Simpson 1976, p. vii). The players seem to represent men of the household. The whole

relief is dedicated to funerary games and celebrations in honour of the goddess Hathor (Crist *et al* 2016, p. 28).

Kaemankh's Playing Scene

The depiction in Kaemankh's Fifth or Sixth Dynasty tomb at Giza shows two players surrounding a large *mehen* board with an upwards protrusion. The board resembles the board of Hesy-Re's wall painting. The playing scene is entitled "Hurry up! Make your turn!" in hieroglyphs. Men of the household are depicted playing the game. It is interesting to note that the senet playing scene next to *mehen* is being played by a man of the household and the tomb owner himself, which might express Kaemankh's preference for senet.

Cultural Memory

Cultural memory is a theoretical construct developed by Jan Assmann which enables the understanding of social mechanisms in creating, maintaining, and forgetting a collective culture specific memory. Cultural memory theory can illuminate possible motives of groups and institutions that utilised the creation and dissemination of a shared memory for political, cultural, or religious, ends. Such a memory encapsulates various characteristic aspects of a culture as its origins, rites, rituals, music, and the overall concept of heritage. Cultural memory theory can explain possible functions that enable the coherence of cultural identity.

Identity is a thing of memory and remembrance (Bergson, 1911; Assmann, 1992/2011, p. 69). Cultural mnemo techniques as rituals, festivals, play, and games, ensure the continuity, coherence, and accuracy of cultural identities. Cultural identity can be perceived through reflection and transmission of culture-specific knowledge (Assmann, 1992/2011, p. 42). However, cultural traits do not have to be always of a complex and conceptual nature. A colour, weather, an environment, or a kind of food can be part of the cultural identity of a people. Cultural identity works very similarly to individual identity (Assmann, 1992/2011, p. 111). But while individual identity may serve mental purposes, cultural identity serves social, political, or religious purposes.

Identity is a matter of consciousness, that is of becoming aware of an otherwise unconscious image of the self. This applies both to individual and to collective life. I am only a person to the extent that I know myself to be one, and in exactly the same way, a group – whether it be a tribe, race, or nation – can only be itself to the degree in which it understands, visualizes, and represents itself as such." (Assmann, 1992/2011, p. 113)

Cultural identity is also established through delimitation. Cultural identity is group specific. Part of this process is achieved through negation towards or opposition to other groups. Drawing lines between "us" and "them" is an effective measure for identity-

establishing (Assmann, 1992/2011, p. 115). This aspect serves also as a motivator to delimitate one's group even more from another. This is achieved through hostility but also through exclusion. Culture-specific knowledge is made exclusive and is withheld towards non-members of a group. An aspect of social exclusivity strengthens the group identity and protects identity-establishing factors, such as cultural canons, from change. The establishment of a coherent group identity results in an integral system of values. This system of values establishes consequently a grade of relevance which structures knowledge and symbolism in the group (Assmann, 1992/2011, p. 102). This means that group members who share the same cultural identity are capable of understanding hierarchies of important and unimportant, central and peripheral, local and inter-local symbols and values (Assmann, 1988, p. 14), thereby allowing the cultural identity to be further preserved and forwarded to newer generations of members. This enables a culture to establish formativity (i.e., educative, civilising and humanising functions) and normativity (i.e., affordance and heuristic functions) thus cultural identity maintains and reproduces itself (Assmann, 1988, p. 15).

The maintenance and reproduction of identity is grounded in the organisation of a cultural canon, or the introduction and rejection of identity-establishing truths and practices. A canon is a form of tradition which becomes most explicit and binding in terms of content.

As a general, independent guide, the "plumb-line" of the canon draws a clear line between what is "A" and what is not "A". This is its prime function. It separates the straight from the crooked, the conventional from the deviant, the good from the bad, the beautiful from the ugly, the true from the false, the just from the unjust. [...] the canon is geared to this binary schema that prestructures all possible operations into two values. (Assmann 1992/2011, p. 105)

A canon functions as a guide in critical questions (Assmann, 1992/2011, p. 123). Canonisation is a cultural process in which an act is standardised and formalised. In the case of a ritual, this means that a game, for example, has to be played to a specific kind of music, with a specific kind of garment, by a specific gender type, at a specific time, etc. A canon has no room for variability. It legitimises an act as representative for a culture's identity and illegitimises any variation of it (Assmann, 1992/2011, p. 156). A canon can be any act, object, myth or history as long as it is formalised and part of the accepted cultural traits of a society. An architectural style can be part of a cultural canon as much as a preferred board game. Assmann points out that the formulation of canons becomes most significant in times of internal cultural polarisation when orders and different canons are challenging each other about the truth or real identity of a culture (Assmann, 1992/2011, p. 106). Canons are basically principles of collective identity-establishing. They stabilise the cultural identity and act as normative consciousness of a whole population (Assmann 1992/2011, p. 108). Canonisation is also a procedure which maximises the effectiveness of repetition in

terms of propaganda. Through canonisation a cultural identity becomes more convenient to enact.

Another important aspect that Assmann highlights in the context of cultural identity is the social stratification which is embedded within; culture as a tool of social stratification. A cultural identity does not just delimitate itself against other identities, but it also structures internal social hierarchies. In ancient societies, as in Egypt, Assmann speaks of lateral ethnicities and their ideology of a vertical solidarity (1992/2011, p. 130). The idea of vertical solidarity is the belief that this social stratification is part of the cultural identity. It is part of the profound order of things in a given society. A contemporary comparison can be found in the Indian caste system in which lower social charges conform to the given order, based on the belief of a primal and sacred order of things, even though it disadvantages them. The disruption of this order would cause an identity crisis which is averted through the acceptance of the order as part of the cultural identity one is and wants to be part of.

***Mehen* with/in/out the Cultural Memory**

Mehen becomes visible within the Egyptian Culture in the late Naqada Period. Even though not as a game, the idea of *mehen* is materialised within the ornamentation of a grave good. This process happens during an identification stage of Egyptian culture. The foundations of a coherent Egyptian cultural identity are set in these years (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 48). It may be argued that the emergence of *mehen* and the unification of Egypt may be no coincidence. During the transition between the Naqada III Period and the Early Dynastic Period burials start to become more elaborated. “Early processes of competition and the aggrandizement of local polities in Upper Egypt” (Bard, 2000, p. 57) take place and find their expression in daily life which, in turn, remain reflected in the grave equipment of a rising elite caste. The late Naqada Period is a phase which is significant for its early traces of long-distance trade and increasing wealth of Upper Egyptian towns. Wealth, knowledge and influence are accumulated and form the basis for the emancipation of an elite caste from other classes of society (Wilkinson, 2010, pp. 53–55).

The unification of Egypt may appear in the archaeological record as an overarching socio-cultural unit which starts to share a coherent material culture but the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt brought also stricter internal hierarchies (Köhler, 2017, p. 344). Elaborated social divisions surface in the Early Dynastic Period that manifest in daily life affairs as also in distinct material culture. Lateral ethnicities form a coherent cultural identity which is characterised through internal social differences (Assmann 1992/2011, pp. 130–131; Berger & Luckmann 1966, p. 120).

Mehen may appear as an object of social delimitation in the Early Dynastic Period. It appears only in elite and royal contexts and seems through its standardisation, visible in its

knob-like type, like an object of competitive prestige. Whether *mehen* was played by common people during that period cannot be known, but only elites and royals were seemingly in possession of the actual game (Crist *et al*, 2016, p. 31). Owning a set of *mehen* as known from the cemeteries of Abydos may have become a kind of status symbol but was also a device for establishing identity. Boards that are thought to have been found in Abydos and boards from Quft exhibit a standardised style. This shows that *mehen* had been already part of a collective understanding of the game and its fixed visual properties. A shape which seemingly derived from the Naqada lid-board could have become a standard and universal symbol of prestige and identification with upper class in Egypt. Yet, one could ask why a board game becomes important in the establishment of a social identity. Two factors play an important role, namely that *mehen* served not just a game but also as a ritual activity (Piccione, 1990; Rothöhler, 1999).

The practice of *mehen* may have given elites and pharaohs the feeling of experiencing divination while playing which cut the ties with the secular world and the lower classes (David, 1962, pp. 13–14; Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 39). Games in funerary equipment are hence interpreted as “metaphor for the struggle to achieve a blessed after-life.” (Wilkinson, 2008, p. 88). This activity could have been reserved for the upper class in Egypt. Another factor which reinforces the exclusivity of *mehen* can be found in anthropological research on archaic societies. According to Huizinga, elaborated games were practiced only by elites; constituting an opposition to the laborious lifestyle of peasants and slaves (Huizinga, 1938/2012, p. 34). In the case of the Egyptians of the Early Dynastic Period, it remains difficult to state if *mehen* was practiced for leisure, ritual, or both. Nevertheless, both leisure and ritual were surely monopolised by the upper classes of Egyptian society (Wilkinson 2010, p. 57). *Mehen* was seemingly incorporated into the lifestyle of elites as a social identity-establishing object of prestige. The game served effectively for this purpose as it embodied an elaborated conduct of leisure, ritual, or both (Cailliois, 2001, pp. 40–41). *Mehen* appears to serve social identity-establishing purposes within its lateral ethnicities.

At the dawn of the Old Kingdom a centralised, organised and coherent Egyptian society emerges. Class structures which developed earlier appear already fixed in the early Old Kingdom (Lloyd, 2014, p. 8). These class structures seem to become more fluid, especially from the Fifth Dynasty onwards until the end of the Sixth Dynasty where territorial administration “is characterized by increasing decentralisation” (Müller-Wollerman, 2014, p.4). The earliest evidence of *mehen* in the Old Kingdom is a wall painting. *Mehen* appears through size and decoration central within this painting. While no actual board games were found, it is accepted that listings and depictions of equipment in Egyptian funerary contexts supplemented their material presence (Wilkinson, 2008, pp. 86–87). The depiction of *mehen* serves hence as a document of a proper contemporary *mehen* set and as a statement of the tomb owner. It must be added that Hesy-Re did not depict himself playing *mehen*, he only depicted his ownership of *mehen*. Similarly, as in the Early Dynastic Period,

ownership of *mehen* is highlighted. The depicted board and its playing figures are decorated, elements of ivory and ebony are visible. This suggests wealth and a set of *mehen* as an object of prestige.

In the Old Kingdom, the final and most elaborated *mehen* board type appears, namely the goose-head type. These boards are crafted with high quality, exhibit details, and contain precious stones. Goose-head type *mehen* boards reflect high standards in artistic craftsmanship of the Old Kingdom which could be only issued and obtained by elite or royal members of Egyptian society. In the Fourth Dynasty, *mehen* appears within a listing of funerary equipment in the tomb of prince Rahotep (Cristet *al*, 2016, p. 15). The listing expresses again exclusive ownership and identification of and with *mehen*. This listing is the only evidence in the Old Kingdom of *mehen* within a royal context.

At the end of the Old Kingdom, a new artistic convention surfaces within elite funerary contexts of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasty. *Mehen* playing scenes are depicted on so called banquet scenes (Khalifa 2014, p. 475). All of those scenes, except for small differences in detail, seem similar to each other. It is the first time that *mehen* is not represented in funerary contexts with ownership and prestige, but with ritual (or leisure) conduct. However, a curious development can also be observed. While *mehen* sets were depicted, listed, and placed as grave equipment of elites and royals in earlier periods, the players depicted on the reliefs of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasty are clearly men of the household of the tomb owners and, therefore, of a lower class. This could mean that either through democratisation processes in the late Old Kingdom, activities which were reserved for elites could be now undertaken by other charges of society (Hays, 2011, p. 130). On the other hand, the reliefs could indicate that *mehen* was artistically denounced from an elite identity-establishing object of prestige to an activity of the lower class. It can also be suggested that the reliefs may offer an example of an emerging act of re-canonisation. *Mehen* becomes re-canonised into a fixed representation with unambiguous symbolic value. *Mehen* is now part of a banquet scene and is therefore also a symbol for it. With regards to depiction of lower-class men playing the game, it may serve as the visual introduction of new social paradigm concerning *mehen*. The game is now played by a lower class and seems to have lost its role as an identity establishing device among the elite.

The end of the Old Kingdom is also the end of the board game practice of *mehen* as an active part of Egyptian culture which is represented in funerary contexts. During the Middle and New Kingdom, characteristic aspects of the game appear exclusively in form of religious texts and mythical stories (Piccione 1990; Rothöhler 1999). The serpent deity Mehen is the only manifestation within the cultural memory of the Egyptians that remains as a reminder of the actual board game practice (Rothöhler 1999, pp. 10–11).

It appears that the transformation of *mehen's* function as an identity-establishing entity for the upper-class heralds the end of the practice. It is interesting to note that many artistic

conventions and canons in the Middle Kingdom were grounded in the Old Kingdom, but *mehen* is visibly left omitted from that renaissance. The game *senet* on the other hand, which co-existed with *mehen*, is incorporated into the funerary equipment and depictions of the Middle Kingdom.

Conclusion

In Pharaonic Egypt, art has been always issued by the ruling class (Assmann, 1992/2011, p. 150). The reason why *mehen* ended up being forgotten may have been an intentional decision. If the reliefs of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasty indicate that *mehen* was reduced to a lower-class activity, this could eventually mean that the practice of this game would have been avoided by the upper class of the Middle Kingdom as an identity-establishing object. Yet, if *mehen* was also a popular game among the lower class in the Old Kingdom, it remains puzzling that the game has not reproduced itself in form of graffiti or low-quality game boards like *senet* has (Förster, 2007; cf. Widura 2015, p. 56; Crist *et al* 2016, p. 32). In light of the fact that there is no sustainable proof for *mehen* being popular among the lower class it seems that, while at the end of the Old Kingdom the upper class might have stopped identifying itself with *mehen*, it also delegated *mehen* as a social identity-establishing device towards the lower class. Assuming that the upper-class identified *mehen* with the lower-class, there is still no evidence that the lower-class identified itself with *mehen*. The game was henceforth rejected by the one class while it obviously remained unpopular with the other. This status could be the reason why the game was not able to reproduce itself and exist beyond its role as identity establishing practice. However, new *mehen* finds could have the potential to refute this theory.

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