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LUDUS LATRUNCULORUM GAME BOARD FROM NOVAE (MOESIA INFERIOR)

Abstract: This paper concerns an unusual tile featuring an engraved *latrunculi* game board, a *planta pedis* stamp and the letter “h”, traced with a finger. This is the best preserved game board discovered to date in Sections IV and XII at Novae.

Keywords: Novae, Moesia Inferior, *ludus latrunculorum*, building ceramics, brick stamps, legio I Italica, *planta pedis*

Novae¹ is located in northern Bulgaria, several kilometres east of the town of Svishtov, in a location where the Danube bends strongly southward. It offered a convenient crossing point for the northern tribes in their attempts to penetrate into the Balkans. For this reason, the Romans built a legionary fortress there to serve as a blocking point. Presumably, legio VIII Augusta² was stationed here from the mid-40s CE, only to be replaced in the 70s by legio I Italica, which remained in Novae until the Hun invasion in the mid-fifth century. In the fourth century, Novae became a municipal centre of the province of Moesia Secunda.³ Excavations in Novae, carried out by the Institute of Archaeology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the University of Warsaw began in 1960, while Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań joined in the effort in 1970. At present, five archaeological teams work at Novae: two Bulgarian and three Polish (two from the University of Warsaw and one from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań). During the 65 years of excavations, the researchers unearthed and explored the defensive walls and gates, elements of wooden buildings, *principia*, the *valetudinarium*, legionary and civilian baths, and fragments of the barracks. As for features dating to later periods, a magnificent basilica, houses and villas and artisan workshops were discovered.⁴

In Section IV, which had been regularly surveyed since 1960, archaeological work terminated in 2010. In 2011, a team from the Antiquity of Southeastern Europe Research Centre at the University of Warsaw launched large-scale excavations in Section XII. That area constitutes an excellent record of how settlement at Novae progressed: from the beginning of the fortress,

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² This view has recently been challenged, see LEMKE 2018, pp. 73–87.

³ On the history of Novae see RÓŻYCKI 2016, pp. 455–478.

⁴ DYCZEK 2008, pp. 31–70; DYCZEK 2024.

⁵ DYCZEK 2018, pp. 27–72.

through the Late Antique period and into the early Middle Ages. According to the researchers, legio VIII Augusta built the earliest layers of earthen-timber barracks which were later pulled down by legio I Italica. In the north-western part of that site, the latter constructed the so-called Peristyle House, which functioned until the mid-third century when, just as the *valetudinarium* in Section IV, it fell into disuse. Between 270 and 280, the ruins were converted into a new, even more imposing complex with a central courtyard that may have served public functions, being e.g. the seat of a local authority.⁵

In 2024, archaeological research continued in Section XII in the southern wing of the Peristyle House, where baths—integral to the building—were to be found. Excavations revealed elements of floor heating (*hypocaustum*) and wall heating (*tubulatio*) as well as interiors used for cold baths (*frigidarium*) and hot baths (*tepidarium*). The floors were made of ceramic breakstone, which made them impermeable and resistant to moisture. The interiors were decorated with coloured plaster. The baths strata contained expensive handicraft items, such as bronze ladles and shards of imported amphorae. It would follow the building referred to as the Peristyle House was a residential structure, which warrants the conjecture that it may have been the so-called Centurion's House.⁶ Therefore, it is anything but surprising that a board for *ludus latrunculorum* (Figs. 1–2) together with a pawn (*latro*) was discovered in the service room adjoining the baths, in the layers dating to the early third century (Fig. 3).⁷ In ancient Rome, the game was regarded—especially among the Stoics—as a worthy pastime that nurtured logical thinking, strategic mindset and Roman virtues,⁸ in other words a game perfectly suited for the officers in the Roman army. On the other hand, Ulrich Schädler notes that the Greek game *poleis* relied on similar mechanics to *latrunculi*, but since dice were used to play it, might have been preferred by the legionaries.⁹

Description of the relic (Figs. 1–2)

Tegula, inv. no.: 10/24c

Tile dimensions: 42 × 47 × 3 cm

Board dimensions (at the widest points): 38 × 39 cm

Hectare XVIII; Square 226

South 1.00; East 2.59 m.

Depth: 47,75 m.a.s.l.

Layer: debris of the Peristyle House baths, service room

The “chessboard” (*tabula latruncularia*) covers almost the entire surviving fragment of the tile in question (10-24c, Figs. 1–2). It was engraved after the tile was fired, which may be inferred from the visible chipping on the lines; such an effect would not have occurred if the grid had been made before the firing process. It is worth noting that the tile is covered with a green residue, which indicates that it was exposed to moisture (which would correspond to the location of discovery, i.e. in the baths area), but the residue is not present in the engraved lines. The lines were traced somewhat crookedly and with little precision, producing 13 fields in the upper horizontal row and 12 in the bottom one. The final number of fields in the horizontal line remains unknown, since the tile has not survived in its entirety, though certainly it was no less than 10. To date, seven fragments of similar geometric patterns that may have also served as game boards have been found in Sections IV and XII, but none in a condition similar to the relic in question. Five of those were certainly made on raw tiles, which means that they had

⁶ DYCZEK 2018, pp. 43–61.

⁸ SCHÄDLER 1994, p. 60.

⁷ I am grateful to Prof. Piotr Dyczek for information about the location of discovery.

⁹ SCHÄDLER 1994, p. 50.



Fig. 1. A photo of a roof tile no. 10-24c with a drawn game board for *ludus latrunculorum* (photo M. Duch).

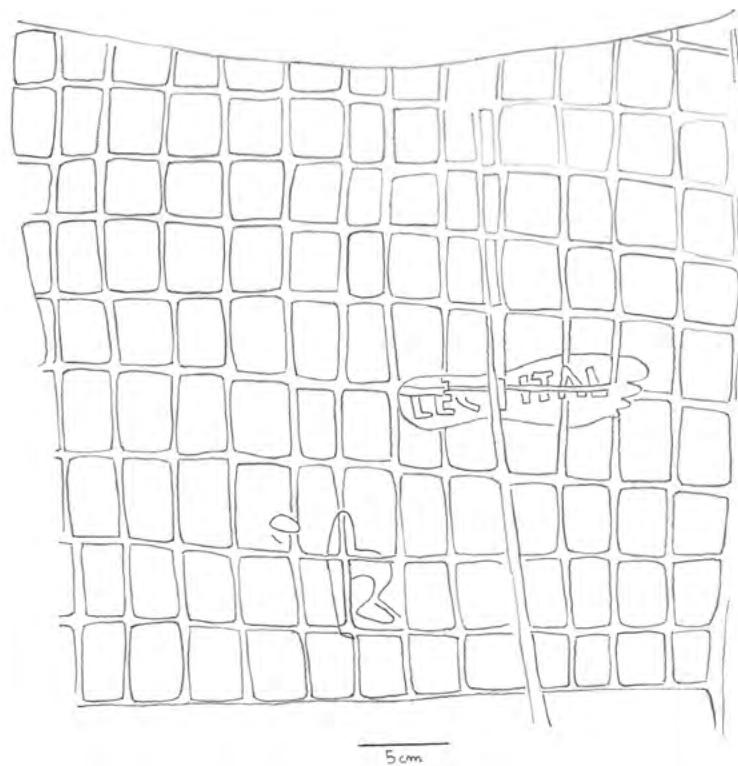


Fig. 2. A redraw of the game board for *ludus latrunculorum* carved on roof tile no. 10-24c (M. Duch).

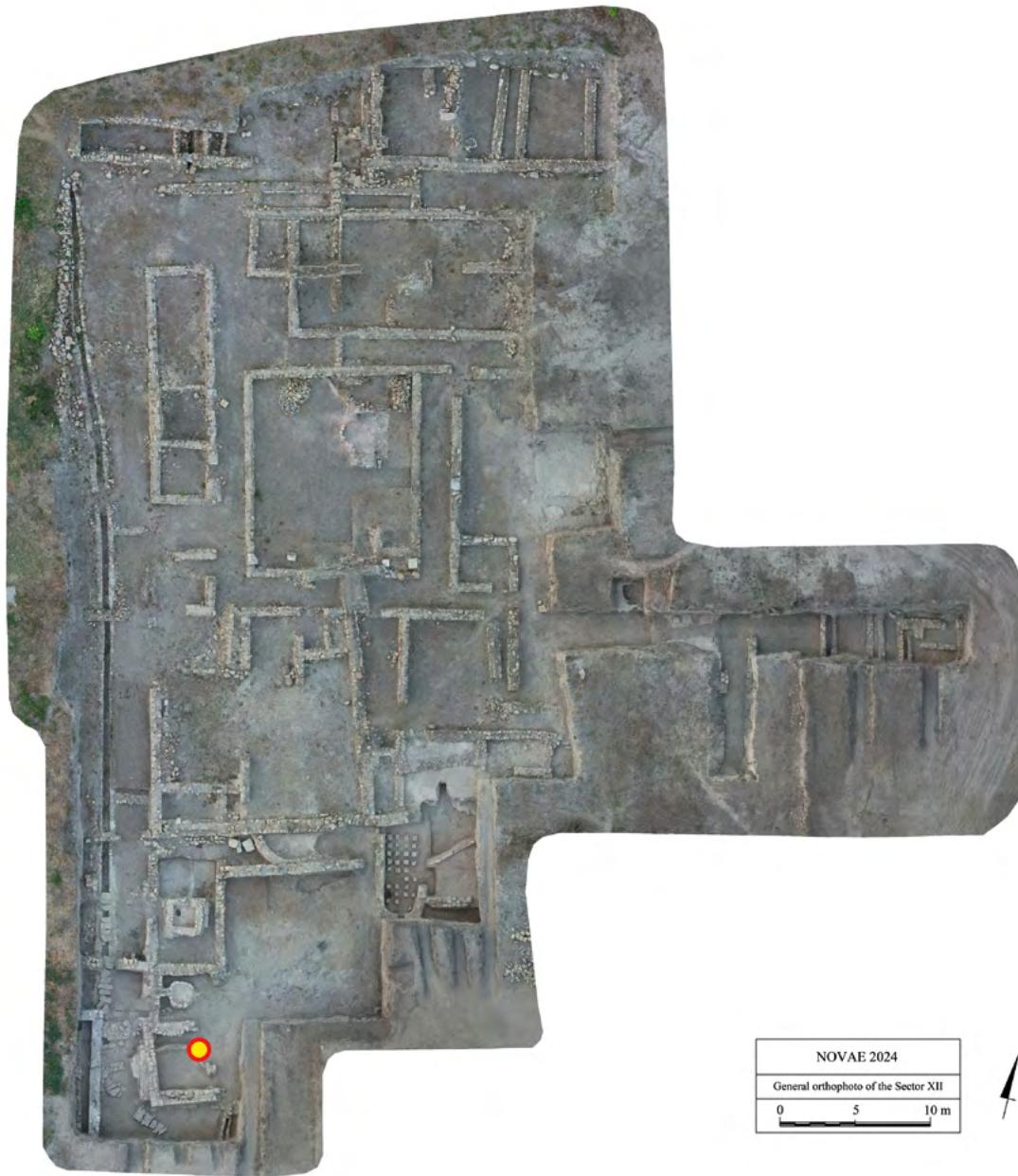


Fig. 3. Section XII, location of the game board discovery (prepared by B. Wojciechowski).

been designed as game boards in the brickyard prior to firing. The major advantage of ceramic game boards was their portability, making it possible for the game to be played anywhere, not necessarily in a game room.

The board in question (10-24c, Fig. 1) is quite large. Varro suggested that they measured 6×6 fields,¹⁰ but smaller ones were also discovered elsewhere on the former territory of the Roman Empire. The boards made by equites of ala II Flavia at Petavonium had 8×8 (though not preserved in their entirety) and 8×9 fields.¹¹ Six *ludus latrunculorum* boards, carved in stone—one of which measured 10×10 fields—were discovered at the site of a fort in Abu Sha’ar on the

¹⁰ Varro, *De lingua Latina*, 10, 22; SCHÄDLER 1994, p. 48. ¹¹ CARRETERO VAQUERO 1998, p. 125, Fig. 2.

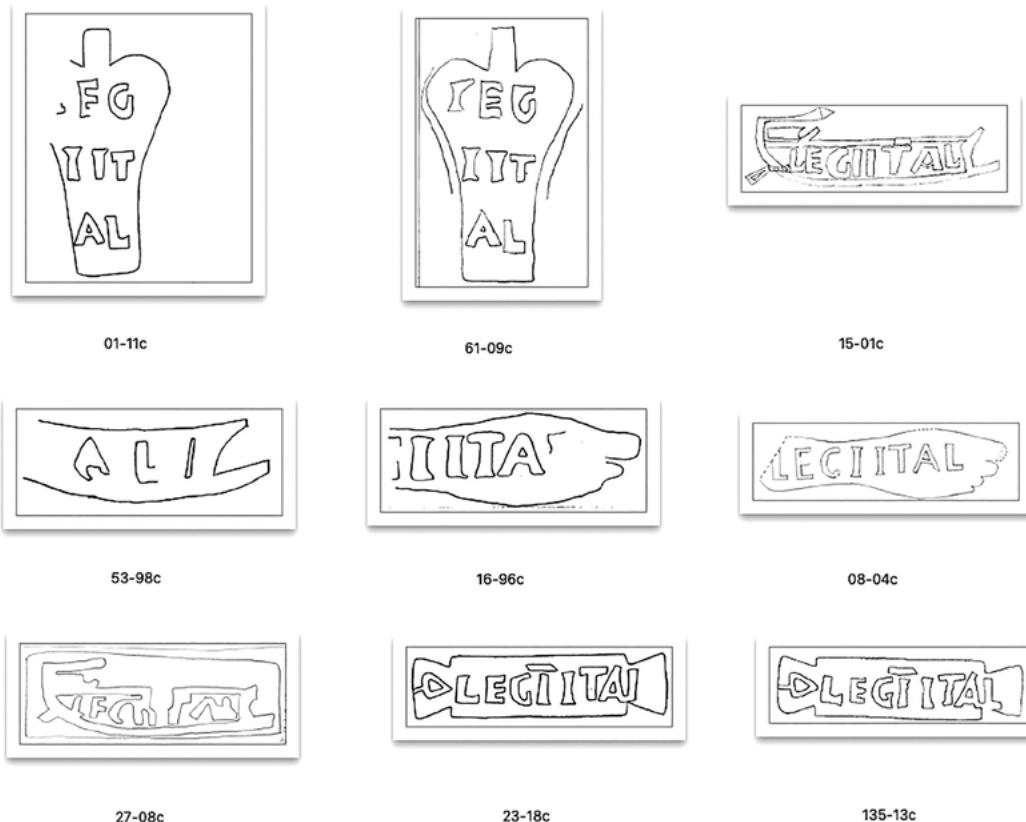


Fig. 4. Drawings of stamps with a non-rectangular frame from Novae (authors of the drawings unknown, prepared by M. Duch).

Egyptian Red Sea coast, about 20 km north of the center of Hurghada.¹² A board discovered in Chester had 8×9 fields,¹³ whereas 10×10 and 9×10 field boards were found in Dover. A slate slab with 8×8 engraved fields as well as a fragment of 8×6 fields was documented in Exeter. A tile board with 9×9 fields was found in Mainz.¹⁴ According to the author's knowledge, the only larger game board known was the one recently discovered in the republican castellum Puig Castellar de Biosca in Lleida (Catalonia), consisting of 11×16 squares.¹⁵ In consequence, there are three possible explanations which account for the large number of fields on the board from Novae: it may have been an adaptation of one of the game's variants (local?), an error in design, or the game may have been played only on a part of the board, without using the entire surface.

Almost centrally, the board features an intersected, foot-shaped (*planta pedis*) stamp of *legio I Italica*, corresponding to type VI-159 in Tadeusz Sarnowski's typology,¹⁶ G1-4 according to Nicola Gudea¹⁷, and VI-112a according to Marta Matuszewska.¹⁸ Tadeusz Sarnowski dated the stamp to the fourth quarter of the second century or the first quarter of the third century CE.¹⁹ However, archaeological finds from Sections IV and XII call such dating into question. Specifically, there are two tile fragments with the *planta pedis* stamp of *legio I Italica* discovered in Section IV, the first of which (08-04c, Fig. 4) was found in the strata dated to the period when

¹² MULVIN, SIDEBOOTHAM 2004, p. 612, Fig. 9.1.

¹³ BELL 1969, p. 85.

¹⁴ SCHÄDLER 1994, p. 50.

¹⁵ RODRIGO REQUENA, ROMANI SALA 2021, p. 7.

¹⁶ SARNOWSKI 1983, p. 38, Pl. VI.

¹⁷ GUDEA 2003, p. 211, Fig. 11.

¹⁸ MATUSZEWSKA 2006, p. 58, Pl. X.

¹⁹ SARNOWSKI 1983, p. 61; DUCH 2017, p. 106, Fig. 7.

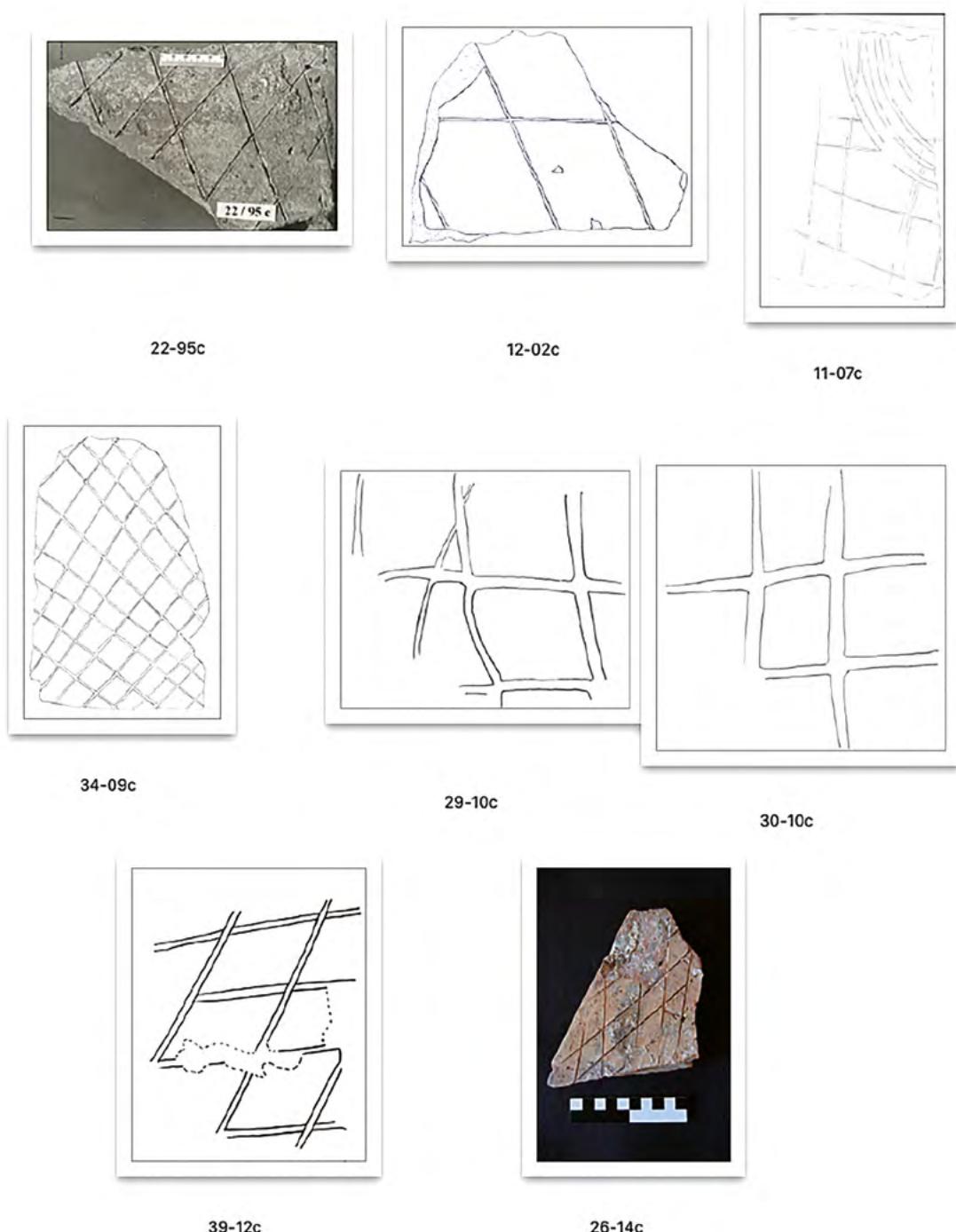


Fig. 5. Fragments of roof tiles with a geometric pattern from section IV and XII of Novae (authors of individual tracings unknown, prepared by M. Duch).

the legionary hospital was built, i.e. the reign of Emperor Trajan.²⁰ The second (06-01c, Fig. 4) formed the enclosure of the channel running along the outer portico of the military hospital in Section IV, in the Via Praetoria, though regrettably it has been preserved very fragmentarily.

²⁰ Information obtained from Prof. Piotr Dyczek.

Moreover, there is a third relic—16-96c (Fig. 4)—originating from the debris of the legionary hospital roof, which makes it difficult to determine whether it was placed there during the construction of the hospital or later, in the course of renovation.²¹ Given such stratigraphic data, one can hardly assert that tiles with the *planta pedis* stamp were certainly produced as early as the reign of Trajan. In this context, attention should be drawn to other equally unusual stamps (Fig. 4), whose frame differed from the most common rectangular shape: stamps stylized as a ship, eagle and *tabula ansata*. The latter are attested already in the Flavian period.²² Those whose shape resembles the legionary eagle were dated to the same period as the *planta pedis* stamps.²³ However, they were discovered in situ in the courtyard of the legionary hospital near the *sacellum*, phase II paving (53-98c, Fig. 4), which is dated to the governorship of T. Vitrasius Pollio,²⁴ in the entrance threshold between rooms 8 and 9 of the *valetudinarium* (15-01c, Fig. 5). As for the building ceramics marked with a ship-like stamp (*liburna*²⁵ or *birema*²⁶), their discoveries can be divided into 4 phases:

- demolition of the legionary bath and construction of the *valetudinarium*: 33-08c, 31-08c, 13-08c, 27-08c, 18-08c, 25-08c, 24-08c, 39-08c, 53-98c, 30-98c
- use of the *valetudinarium*: 08-02c, 26-02c, 15-01c, 41-00c, 28-93c
- legionary hospital abandoned: 113-00c
- civilian development: 11-02c

Such an assignment to particular phases relies solely on the criterion of depth of discovery. However, this approach may be problematic given that these discoveries do not have a clear archaeological context, while brick artefacts are highly “mobile”, being displaced from the lower to the upper strata and vice versa due to erosion and levelling done for construction purposes. Thus, it would be safer to presume two possible datings, either to the Trajanic period—as evidenced by multiple specimens of such bricks in the stratigraphic layers dated to the construction of the legionary hospital—or to the governorship of Vitrasius Pollio in Lower Moesia, i.e. in 156–159. An additional argument in favour of dating those stamps to the Trajanic period is that in terms of typology, the same representations are found on the Trajan’s column.²⁷

In addition to the stamp, the artefact is marked with a finger-drawn letter “h”, identical to the one on the tile fragment inv. no. 78-17c (Fig. 4), found at the top of the wall of the Peristyle House. It is possible that the shard was placed there to fill a gap between stones. However, it is also likely that it ended up there as a result of later intervention.²⁸ Still, thanks to the discovery of the game board tile in question, it may be presumed that the tiles bearing the letter “h” were stamped.

As already noted, the *tabula latrunculorum* tile 10-24c (Figs. 1–2) was discovered in the service room of the baths, in a layer suggesting the final period of its operation in the early third century.²⁹ Even so, one should distinguish between the date when the tile was made and the moment when the game grid was engraved on its surface, since this was executed after firing. Thus, it is possible that the tile in question was produced during the reign of Trajan or the governorship of T. Vitrasius Pollio while the *tabula latrunculorum* was engraved on it in the first half of the third century, before the Peristyle House was abandoned.³⁰ The reign of Septimius Severus saw a number of refurbishment works carried out in the Novae area,³¹ most certainly in Section XII

²¹ Information obtained from Prof. Piotr Dyczek.

²⁷ BOUNEGRU, ZAHARIADE 1996, pp. 52–53.

²² DUCH 2012, pp. 259–282.

²⁸ DUCH 2021, p. 98.

²³ SARNOWSKI 1983, p. 61.

²⁹ Information obtained from Prof. Piotr Dyczek.

²⁴ RECLAW, ŻELAZOWSKI 2008, p. 56.

³⁰ DYCZEK 2018, p. 58.

²⁵ SARNOWSKI, TRYNKOWSKI 1986, pp. 536–541.

³¹ DYCZEK 2018, p. 50.

²⁶ BOUNEGRU, ZAHARIADE 1996, pp. 52–53.

as well. Damaged tiles—such as the one in question, which exhibits a green tarnish indicative of prolonged moisture exposure—were replaced. Consequently, the dating of the *ludus latrunculorum* board discussed here may be narrowed down to a period between the reign of Septimius Severus and the mid-third century.

Apart from the discussed board, seven other fragments of building ceramics were also discovered, featuring geometric patterns that may have also served (or not) as game boards:

1. Tegula: 11-07c (Fig. 5).

Dimensions: 27,8 × 22 × 3,4

Location: Section IV, ha III, sq. 271, south 3,3 m, east 3,3 m, depth 38,23 m a.s.l.

Layer: light brown with fragments of building ceramics and limestone

2. Tegula: 12-02c (Fig. 5).

Dimensions: 14,9 × 15,8 × 3,1

Location: Section IV, ha III, sq. 385, south 3,10 m, east 1,80 m, depth 39,11 m a.s.l.

Layer: debris of the hospital structure

3. Tegula: 22-95c (Fig. 5).

Dimensions: 26 × 17 × 2,6

Location: Section IV, ha X, sq. 73, south 3,0 m, 3,0 m, depth 39,30 m a.s.l.

Layer: debris of the hospital structure

4. Brick: 34-09c (Fig. 5).

Dimensions: 24,9 × 16,4 × ?

Location: Section IV, ha X, sq. 47, south 3,63, east 1,97, depth 39,37 m a.s.l.

Layer: secondary humus

5. Tegula (two fragments of one): 29-10c and 30-10c (Fig. 5).

Dimensions: 11 × 11 × 2,5 and 13,5 × 13,5 × 2,8

Location: Section IV, ha III, sq. 361, south 4,30 m, east 1,63 m, depth 39,42 m a.s.l.

Layer: dark brown with substantial admixture of charcoal

6. Tegula: 39-12c (Fig. 5).

Dimensions: 13,5 × 13 × 2,4

Location: Section XII, ha XVIII, sq. 65, south 2,18, east 4,44, depth 47,18

Layer: dark brown with coals, vicinity the columned portico of the civilian structure.

7. Tegula: 26-14c (Fig. 5).

Dimensions: 16,8 × 10,5 × 3,6

Location: Section XII, ha XVIII, sq. 88, south 3,36 m, east 3,39 m, depth 47,38 m a.s.l.

Layer: debris of the roof of the Peristyle House

The first fragment (11-07c) was discovered in the construction strata of the *valetudinarium*. The second (12-02c) originated from the period when the legionary hospital remained in use, i.e. from the second to the mid-third century. The third (34-09c), fourth (16-96c) and fifth (29-10c and 30-10c) should also be associated with the hospital's operation, but they were discovered in layers dating to the final phase of the facility (they may have been reused). The last two (39-12c, 26-14c) should be associated with the period of the Peristyle House (from Vespasian to the mid-third century).

The game board, discovered at Novae in section XII, in the utility layers of the baths of the Centurion's house, was engraved on an already fired tile between the reign of Septimius Severus and Maximinus Thrax. The tile itself, produced in the first half of the second century, contains on its surface the stamp imprint of the legio I Italica in the shape of a foot (*planta pedis*) and the letter 'h', written with a finger before firing. The board in question is quite large, which may be explained by the local variant of the ludus latrunculorum game or by the fact that the entire surface was not played. It is so far the best preserved board discovered in sections IV and XII of Novae. Seven other smaller fragments have also survived to our times from these sections featuring geometric patterns that may have also served (or not) as game boards (Fig 5).

Summary

This paper analyzes a tile which features a *latrunculi* game board, engraved after firing, a *planta pedis* stamp, and a finger-drawn letter "h". The relic was discovered in the area of the service room adjacent to the baths of the Peristyle House, in a layer dated to the third century. The tile was produced in the first half of the second century, while the game board was made between the reigns of Septimius Severus and Maximinus Thrax. The artefact is unusual in that the game board is larger than those found at other archaeological sites, both in Egypt and Britain, with a grid comprising at least 12×10 fairly carelessly carved fields.

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