

Gaming Pieces in the US Southwest

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Abstract:

Tabular pieces of worked bone, commonly referred to as gaming pieces, have been found in archaeological sites throughout North America and the US Southwest. This project focuses on gaming pieces in Southwestern archaeological sites, with an emphasis on the Gila River basin. Data on gaming pieces in this area are compared to the Great Basin and surrounding regions, where much of the current research on these items has been focused. The analysis and comparison of context and other characteristics of known occurrences of gaming pieces in the Southwest inform a larger picture of how these gaming pieces may have been used in the past.

Research goals:

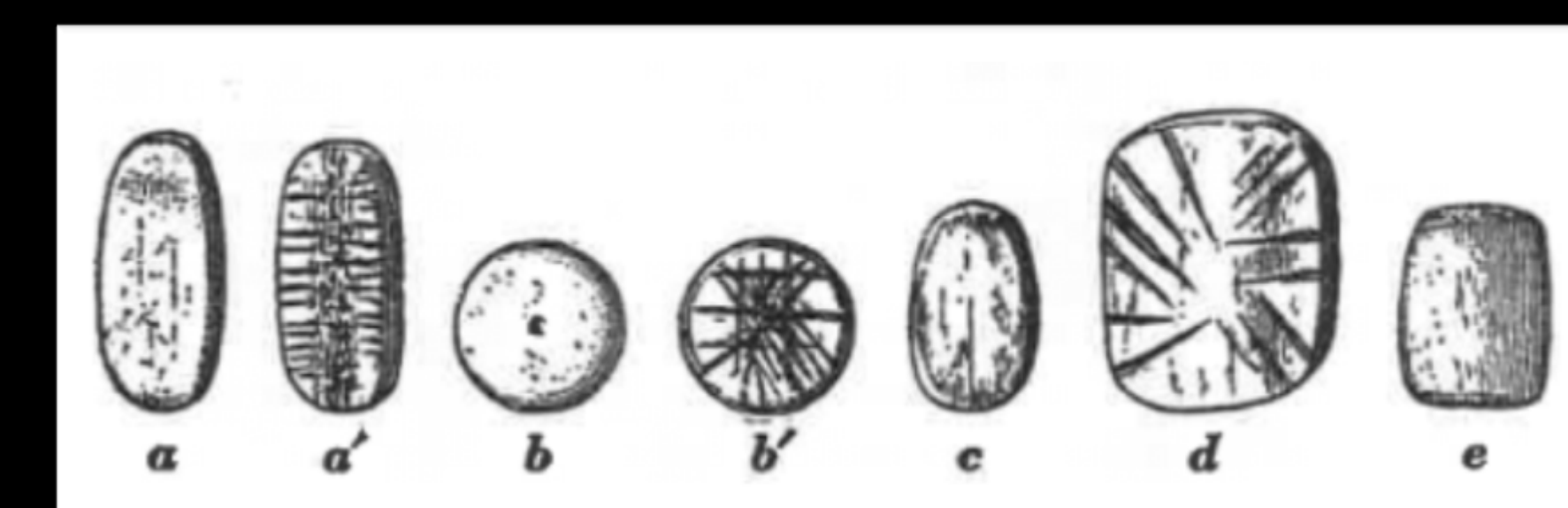
- Locate site reports from the Mogollon area that reference gaming pieces, especially bone examples
- Note the contexts in which the gaming pieces were found and number of items present
- Identify patterns in gaming piece use
- Compare Mogollon regional patterns to those from other areas

Research methods and regional patterns:

- Over 30 references (primarily site reports and other publications) were examined for reports of bone “gaming pieces,” “dice,” or other similar items
- Surprisingly, these items were reported in only five sites in the Mogollon area
- Additional time spent searching may reveal more examples, but they are generally difficult to locate in published reports
- A much larger number of bone gaming pieces are reported from the Great Basin and Ancestral Pueblo areas
- Unfortunately, examples from the Mogollon area are too rare to allow regional comparisons



Carved gaming pieces from Cave 1, Utah. Blake De Pastino, 2015, accessed 2 April 2018 <<http://westerndigis.org/dice-gaming-utah-cave-prehistoric-gambling/>>



Bone “dice” from the Swarts Ruin. H.S. and C.B. Cosgrove, The Swarts Ruin: a Typical Mimbres site in Southwestern New Mexico, Vol. XV, No. 1, 1924-27

Patterns in Mogollon region gaming pieces:

- 4 of 5 sites are on the upper Gila River drainage; only 1 is in the Mimbres drainage
- 3 of 5 Mogollon sites included more than one gaming piece; 2 included only one reported example.
- Time periods represented span the AD 200-1300 time period.
- No strong temporal patterns are evident, but the small sample size makes patterns difficult to recognize.



Southwestern archaeological culture areas showing locations of Mogollon area sites with bone gaming pieces. Modified from a figure by Catherine Gilman.

Site	Time period	Number of gaming pieces	Reference
Tularosa Cave	Unspecified	13 bone “dice”	Hough 1914
SU	AD 200-550	1 bone “die”	Martin and Rinaldo 1946
Swarts	AD 1000-1130	7 bone “dice” and “chips”	Cosgrove and Cosgrove 1932
Heron	AD 1000-1130	1 “worked bone”	Burns 1972
Gila Cliff Dwellings	AD 1180-1300	1 “bone die” and 4 similar items made from other materials	Anderson 1986



Replica bone gaming pieces and photo by Allen Denoyer, 2016.

Discussion and suggestions future research:

- Most reports focus on descriptive characteristics of gaming pieces (size, shape, markings, etc)
- Context is not always provided in reports; future reports should specify:
 - Context within a room or space (e.g. floor, general fill)
 - Other artifacts found in association
- Published examples of gaming pieces are too rare to reliably examine patterns in their distribution
- Published descriptions currently lack context information adequate for examining such patterns.