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## *Prehistoric Games of North American Indians: Subarctic to Mesoamerica*

Barbara Voorhies (ed.),  
Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2017,  
400 pp., ISBN 1607815591, \$60.00 (hardcover).

### Reviewed by Claire E. Ebert

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Building upon Stewart Culin's seminal cross-cultural ethnographic work *Games of the North American Indians* (1907), this volume moves beyond an accounting of the morphological variability of gaming pieces, boards, and playing courts to provide in-depth analyses of the role of games among ancient societies of North America. Barbara Voorhies introduces the volume through her own experience of identifying what were initially perplexing circular features impressed into earthen floors during excavations of Archaic Period (~7,000–3,500 B.C.) shell middens along the Pacific Coast of Chiapas, Mexico. Further investigations revealed that the circular features were quite similar to boards used for dice games recorded by Culin. Voorhies' anecdote serves to reinforce not only the ubiquity of games among prehistoric societies, but their antiquity as well. The chapters in the volume provide a broad survey of not only games of chance, like the dice games played by early fisher-forager-farmers who visited coastal sites in Mexico, but also those requiring physical skill and calculated strategy. Each contribution offers multiple lines of evidence for the varied but essential links that prehistoric games held with myth, religion, and ceremonial and quotidian life, in addition to providing sources of fun and general merriment in the past.

Eastern North America is one of the best represented regions in the volume, with several chapters describing ethnohistorically known games and the identification of their material correlates in archaeological contexts. Several chapters review the characteristics of bone, stone, and plum pit dice, among other gaming pieces, found in burial contexts across the Atlantic Seaboard (Kevin Leonard, Chapter 2) and Great Lakes region (Ronald Williamson and Martin Cooper, Chapter 4). The contribution by Thomas Zych (Chapter 5) provides

an example from the American Bottom, where *chunkey* stones (large stone disks) were used in a local variant of a common Mississippian competition of physical prowess. Both dice and *chunkey* stones were associated with high stakes gambling, which could sometimes result in the loss of all of an individual's possessions or, in extreme cases, the enslavement of their entire family (Catherine Cameron and Lindsay Johansson, Chapter 16). While many of these games are described as being played by men, several authors also cogently highlight the role of women's gambling games in setting social relationships and norms.

Readers of this journal will be particularly interested in chapters focusing on games among societies in western North America. Gabriel Yanicki's discussion of the hoop-and-arrow game (Chapter 7) provides an interesting argument that gaming competition was a form of costly signaling essential for defining status and access to resources among the Fremont and other Plains/Plateau groups. The ubiquity of archaeological evidence for other types of games—including wood and bone dice, darts, balls, and hoops—discussed by several authors, suggests that games may be linked to shared socio-economic networks that traversed the western half of the continent. Chapters focused on western North America, in particular, provide great examples through ethnographic documentation and photographs of how variants of prehistoric games continue to be played by, and impact the lives of, modern Native American peoples.

The case studies from Mesoamerica provide the broadest overview of different types of games, competitions, and forms of entertainment. Chapter 12 (John Walden and Barbara Voorhies) and Chapter 15 (Susan Evans) both focus on the Mesoamerican board game of *patolli*. Evans explores the concept of magical thinking—the idea that thoughts or actions can influence a specific outcome—as an essential component of gambling in Aztec *patolli* games. Evans' chapter also contains wonderful illustrations adapted from the Codex Mendoza and Codex Magliabechiano that help situate the role of *patolli* within Aztec society and its association with the cosmos for both elites and commoners alike. Walden and Voorhies provide a complimentary perspective from the Maya lowlands through an exceptionally comprehensive survey of when, where, and by whom *patolli* was played. They suggest that, unlike the public atmosphere in which the Aztecs played, Late Classic (~A.D. 600–900/1000)

Maya *patolli* was more of a ritual affair played on graffiti-style boards that were restricted to private elite precincts and temples. However, they argue that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and do not rule out the possibility that portable *patolli* boards may have been widely used across the Maya region. Future household and settlement research may yet provide evidence for *patolli* in non-elite settings.

Chapters on Mesoamerica also focus on other forms of play that are seldom discussed by archaeologists in depth. One of the most stimulating case studies in the book is a quantitative examination of Formative Period (~1,600–500 B.C.) figurines from Chalcatzingo, Mexico by Mark Harlan (Chapter 11). While some Mesoamerican archaeologists have traditionally considered figurines to be ritually significant “cult” items, Harlan’s analysis of morphological characteristics across a large sample of figurines provides convincing support for an alternative hypothesis that these artifacts were children’s playthings and essential for learning social cues. One of my favorite chapters was Gerardo Gutiérrez’s discussion of Mesoamerican acrobatics (Chapter 14). His dynamic discussion ranges from the Formative through Colonial periods across Mesoamerica to paint a vivid picture of elite rituals and community festivals, emphasizing the “ritual merriment” of entertainment. I was particularly struck at the wonderment that must have been felt at festivals and fairs when witnessing feats of balance and strength, including tightrope walking, stilt dancing, and

*palo valador*, a 17 m.-high post from which acrobats flew on ropes.

While the volume covers a remarkable array of prehistoric North American games, Warren de Boer concludes by highlighting some common themes shared by the case studies. First, much of what we know about ancient games, based on ethnohistoric data, suggests that they had set rules that were important for how they impacted other sectors of society. A standard lexicon of rules often resulted in standardization in gaming pieces, boards, and other paraphernalia, and this is how we identify them in the archaeological record. Second, the rules of games were (and still are) often bent and broken to serve the needs of a particular player or team. An enhanced understanding of the dynamics of prehistoric games will inform broader anthropological and archaeological questions about status, division of labor, economy, and community in prehistory. *Prehistoric Games of North American Indians* makes a significant advance in this direction, and is sure to have great influence on future archaeological interpretations of prehistoric games in North America and elsewhere in the ancient world.

## REFERENCE

- Culin, Stewart  
1907 *Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology: Games of North American Indians*. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.



## *Regional Settlement Demography in Archaeology*

Robert D. Drennan, C. Adam Berrey,  
and Christian E. Peterson,  
Clinton Corners, NY: Eliot Werner Publications, 2015,  
200 pp., ISBN 9780989824941, \$32.95 (paper).

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This book broadly introduces settlement demography, with selected examples from around the world of how it

can be applied. Despite the importance of demographic work, this book only has the space to cover the basics of why it is important to archaeologists and how the work can be applied. It is, obviously, limited to the settlement demography of “settlements.” It does not look at the demographics of mobile hunter/gatherer societies (although it suggests that bioarchaeology can address some of these questions). Instead, it focuses on sedentary societies and is directed at non-demographically specialized archaeologists. While I consider this book a “must read” for all archaeologists, it is not an in-depth