Exploration of Ancient Board Games at Aurangabad Caves, Maharashtra

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Abstract: *The following report contains information of a detailed survey conducted with the intent to document and study the diversity of game boards etched on the floors in the Aurangabad caves. Our method of documentation relied on physical inspection of each accessible cave, spotting, measuring, photographing and recording the games present in them along with contextual data. We faced a number of problems in the collection mainly due to the caves being badly weathered, and many being inaccessible due to being locked up by the authorities for the purpose of public safety. In spite of this, we were able to collect a large number of diverse games – most already known, including variations – along with a number of old graffiti etched on the floor of these caves. The data collected from this survey is part of an extensive, ongoing study of rock-cut caves and other monuments in Maharashtra, with the ultimate aim of finding, cataloguing, and if possible, reviving ancient board games as a living tradition and as an important part of the intangible cultural heritage of India.*

Keywords: *Aurangabad Caves, Board Games, Explorations, Mancala, Trade Routes*

Introduction

Games have been an integral part of human lives, be it in the present or the past. They have been seen as means of teaching, planning/ strategizing, bonding or simply as leisure activities (Kamath and Gowri Raghavan, 2020). They have been parts of unbroken traditions in one form or another. Many of these games have also travelled in and out of countries, or have been exchanged by means of trade and travel or even political activities,thus, giving us an idea about their geographical spread (Parlett; 2004). Finkel (1999) writes, "*Games do not respect the political or military boundaries, they travel*

freely from culture to culture, sometimes developing or evolving in the process." There are instances where multiple variations of a particular game can be traced in a single region.

The games may not differ in their intangible form (i.e. in their rules and experiences), but the game boards and pieces vary in form and materials used to produce them. The fabric out of which a game is made gives us information about the availability and concentration of raw material in the particular region, or the trade involved in acquiring the material. While most game boards can be easily prepared with disposable material, many boards excavated from various sites have been found to bear embellishments of precious stone inlays or faience in wood, boards made out of clay; manipulatives such as cowrie shells and ivory dice have also been found. These commodities further explain the intricate trading network that existed in the past, as some materials, for example, ivory and shells, were specifically traded from India (Gowri Raghavan, 2020). Board games also become a canvas for different art forms and artistic expressions unique to their location. These boards can be drawn or etched and are also seen in forms of embroidered work, and painted handkerchiefs. They can also translate into wood work , metal work, adobe and ceramics. Board games also become a part of old literary accounts such as Rasas, Vedas, court records and many poems (Topsfield, 2006).

Games boards made of perishable material are lost over a period of time, while others that are found in excavations are rarely found *in situ*. Many that become a part of family heirlooms remain out of reach for the general public and researchers alike. Ritual and stories around games keep it as a cultural memory (e.g. Claus, 1987); the loss of these stories is thus the loss of the game itself. Hence studying them becomes a challenge. Apart from these portable forms, game boards have been found etched on the floors and plinths and other surfaces of rock-cut caves (Bhosale, 2020; Rane, 2019), forts, temples (Gowda, 2020; Reddy and Deme, 2020) and even on stray rocks (Iyengar, 2020). Such boards manage to survive despite changing weather conditions and other environmental factors. They can be easily studied in their context as such games become a living memory of the monument or surface where they have been etched. This paper focuses on studying the games scattered across the lengths of the Aurangabad Caves.

The caves, being excavated in the basaltic hills make them susceptible to deterioration caused by weathering in the form of fissure and degradation in rock quality. The excessive use of cement made in an attempt to conserve these caves has led to a loss of many board games etched on the floor. In the absence of a better means of conservation the use of cement is inevitable, making the documentation of these board games all the more imperative.

General Description of the Study Area

The Aurangabad Buddhist Rock-cut Caves are situated near the city of Aurangabad in the district of the same name, approximately 3 km north-west of the well-known monument of Bibi ka Maqbara. They are spread in two different sets (12 in total) on the Sihyachal ranges, and come under the protection of the Archaeological Survey of India.

Cave 1 was locked by the authorities and is not in a very good condition, even though it bears elaborate images carved in the verandah. Cave 2 and Cave 5 show a similar floor plan as Cave 1 with a central shrine and a *pradakṣiṇapatha* around it. The walls of the *pradakṣiṇapatha* are decorated with a number of *Shravasti* miracle panels and Bodhisattvas. Cave 3 and Cave 6 feature sculptures with diverse attires and headgears, namely those of Greeks, Persians, etc. Cave 4 is a *caitya* of Hīnayāna style, with a huge central *stupa* around which goes a *pradakṣiṇapatha. The caitya* hall is lined with plain, square pillars with an open or broken façade. Cave 6 also features similar devotee sculptures as that of Cave 3 but it is much simpler in its floor plan. Cave 7 has the famous Dancing Panel, one of the most unique features of these caves. Cave 8 can be accessed through a staircase on the veranda of Cave 7, but it is locked. Caves 9 and 10 have been carved a little further from the other caves and are

higher up the hills. The entire façade has collapsed. At the back of the open halls are three separate halls, each leading to a shrine, though the major parts of the caves are unfinished. Caves 11 and 12 are located at the rear of the hill and consist of a simple hall each and plain pillars. They are devoid of any carvings (Qureshi 1998; Gupte, 1964).

The only *Hindu* cave of this set is a small cave that features a central image of *Ganesha*. On the right end is an image of *Durgā*. On the left wall there are images of the *Saptamatrikas* while the right wall features an image of a *Bodhisattva* and a broken *Avalokiteshwara*.

Patronage

The caves bear intricate carvings showcasing fine craftsmanship. Many sculptures depict the diversity in the population that patronized these caves when the complex was functional as a Buddhist monastery. The caves are a little over 50 km away from the historic city of *Paithan*, and lie close to ancient trade routes, such as Nasik to Washim (*Vatsagulma*) and *Sopara* to *Nagardhan (Nandivardhana)*. The sculptures in Caves 3 & 6 indicate that even foreign traders came as far as Aurangabad (Qureshi, 1998). The progression in the style of carving and changing floor plan which can be noticed towards the eastern set of caves, gives the impression of there being heavy lay patronage or a collaborative sponsorship (Brancaccio, 2000).

While the caves are heavily adorned with the iconography of the Mahayana and later schools of Buddhism i.e. Cave 1,2,3,5,6,7,9, etc., the oldest caves can be attributed to the *Hinayana* school (Cave 4 and a lost *Vihara*). The caves also include a Brahmanical cave as a part of the lot. The one accessible Brahmanical cave that is the first cave in the second group, features the *Saptamatrikas* along with a *Ganesha* and *Padmapani* in the same cave (Qureshi, 1998).

Dating

There is no definitive way of dating rock-cut caves; most dates are based on art history and iconographic studies. The Aurangabad caves find their mention in an inscription from Cave 4 at Kanheri. The inscription reads, '*Rajatalaka Paithana patha asana chulika yu kuti kodhi*' which translates to, '*In the paragana or taluka of Paithan called Rajatalaka (ancient Aurangabad) a small temple (kuti) and hall (kodhi) were erected at the Vihara of Sevaja.*' Rajatalaka is an ancient name of Aurangabad. This inscription indicates that the earliest cave of this set existed during the 1st century C.E. (Gupte, 1964; Qureshi, 1998). While Fergusson and Burgess (1880) placed these caves at the end of the 7th Century CE based on their resemblance to the *Ajanta* Caves, M. N. Deshpande dates the third group of caves to the 7th century CE (Qureshi, 1998).
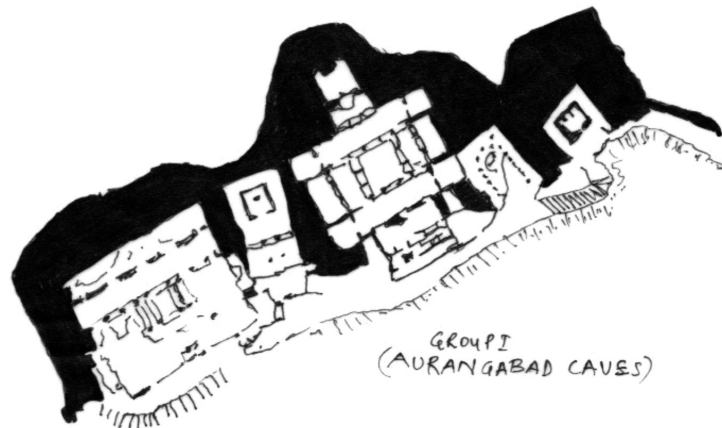

Floor plan of first set of caves i.e. 1-5
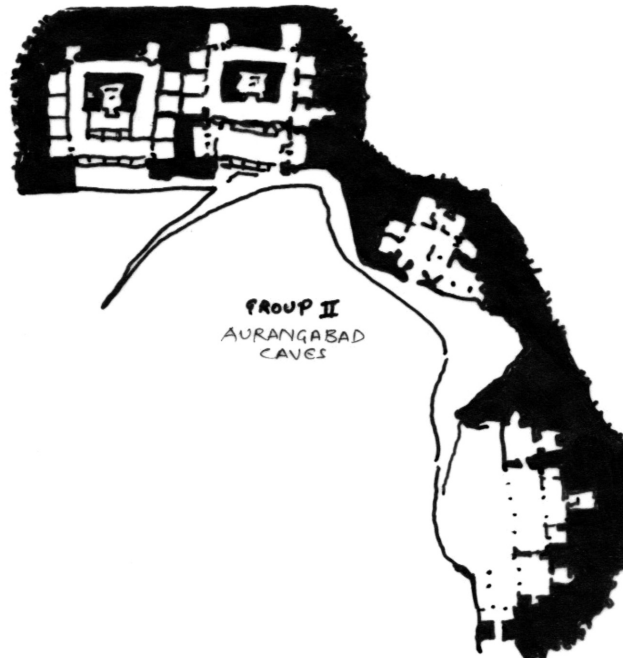
Floor plan of second set of caves

Survey

Caves no 1 and 8 were locked up by the ASI and hence were inaccessible, even though we had permissions. We found no games in Caves 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 12 and in the Brahmanical Cave.

Cave 2

A single 14-inch *mancala* is seen in this cave at a distance of 59" from the door and 59" from the left wall of the *pradakṣiṇapatha* and an orientation of 333 degrees North East. The *mancala* is irregular and weathered.
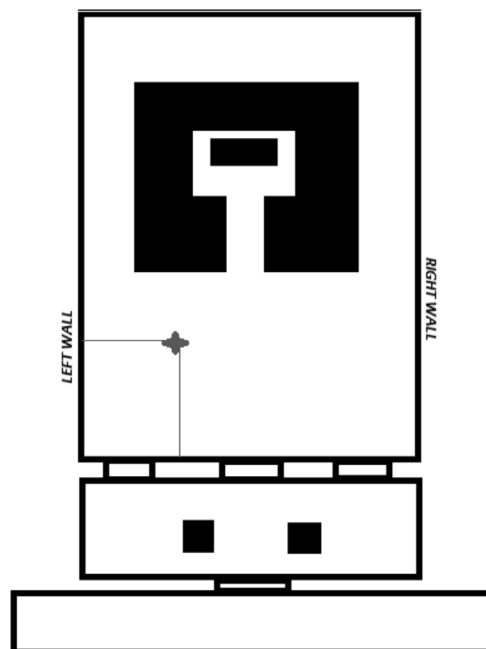
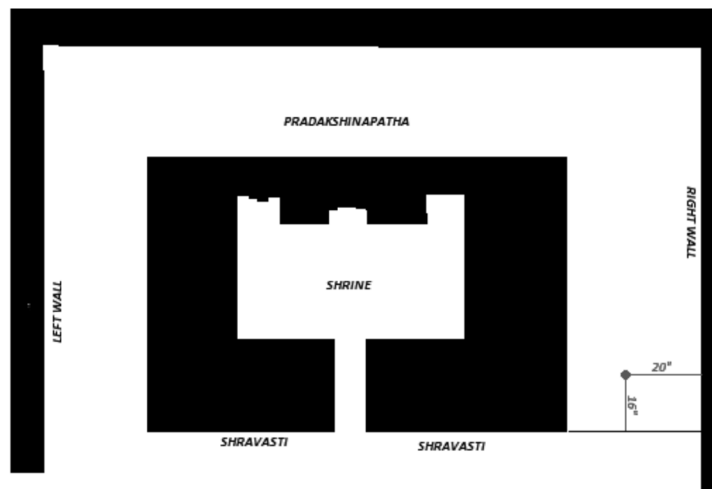**CAVE 2: a: approx. position of the board within the cave**
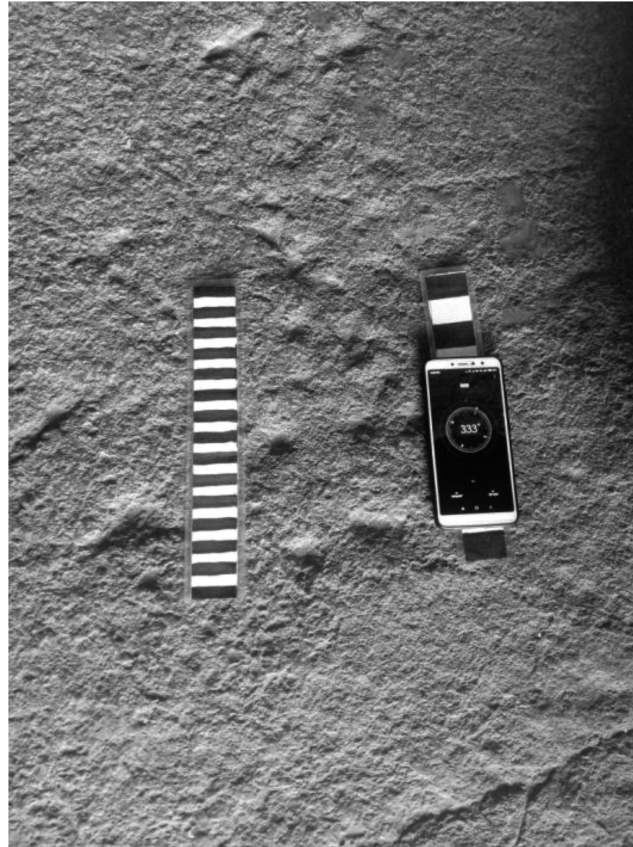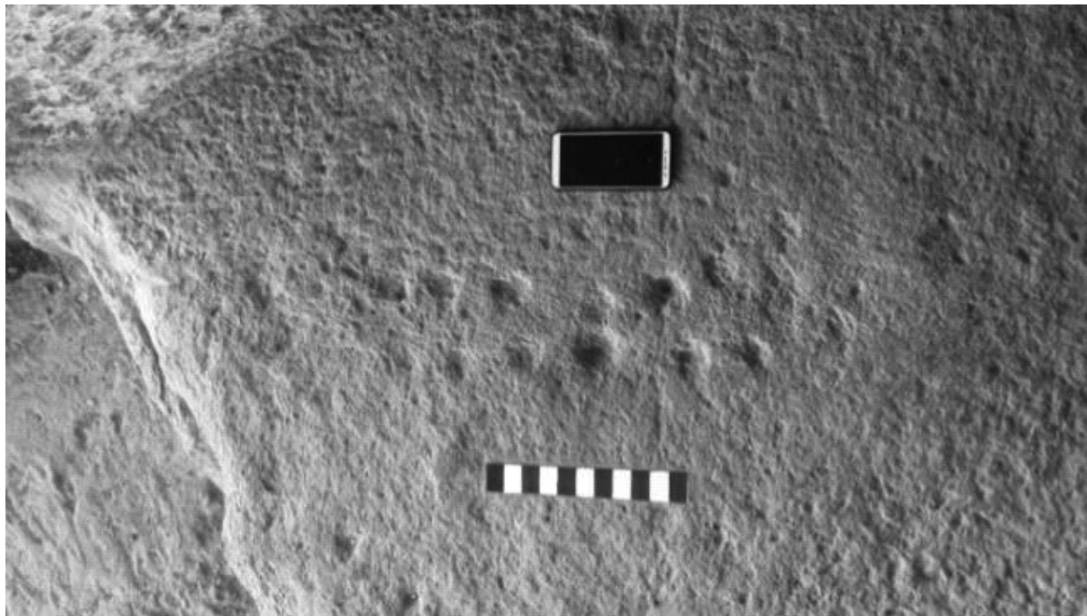
CAVE 2: b: image of the *mancala* board

	Location	*Size*	*Condition*
Mancala 1	Near the left wall of the *pradakṣiṇapatha*, 330 degree NE	14-inch, 3-4 cavities approx. in two rows	weathered and shallow

Cave 5

The cave is carved at a height compared to the other caves in this set and looks isolated. In this cave we found a solitary *mancala* with irregularly placed shallow holes at a direction of 26 degrees North East and at a distance of 16" from the entrance and 20" from the right wall.

**CAVE 5: 2 approx. position of the *mancala* within the cave**

CAVE 5: 1: image of the *mancala*

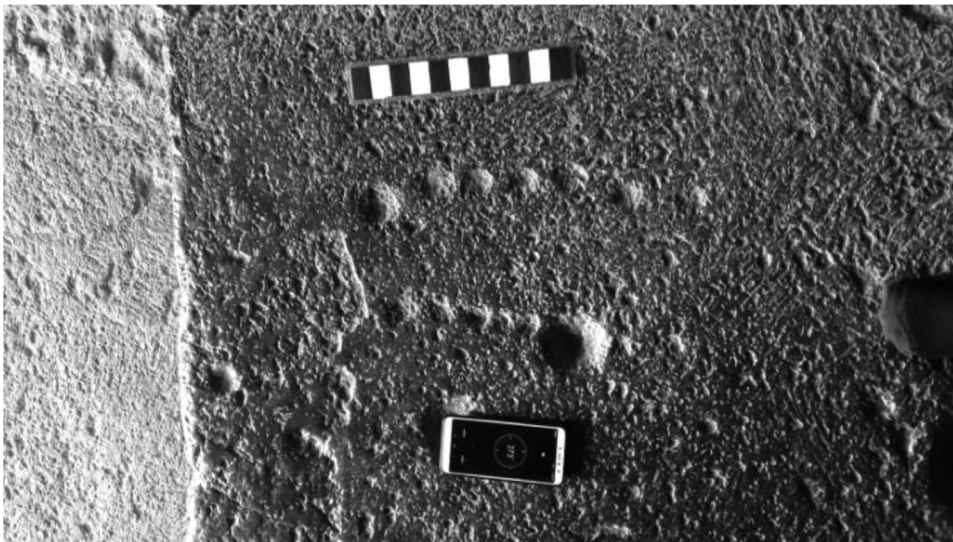|	Location	Size	Condition
Mancala 1	26 degree NE , 20" away from thee right wall of the central shrine		weathered and shallow

Cave 6

This cave contains 4 *mancalas* out of which three are on the partition that separates the outer hall and the antechamber and the fourth-is inside the antechamber towards the left wall.
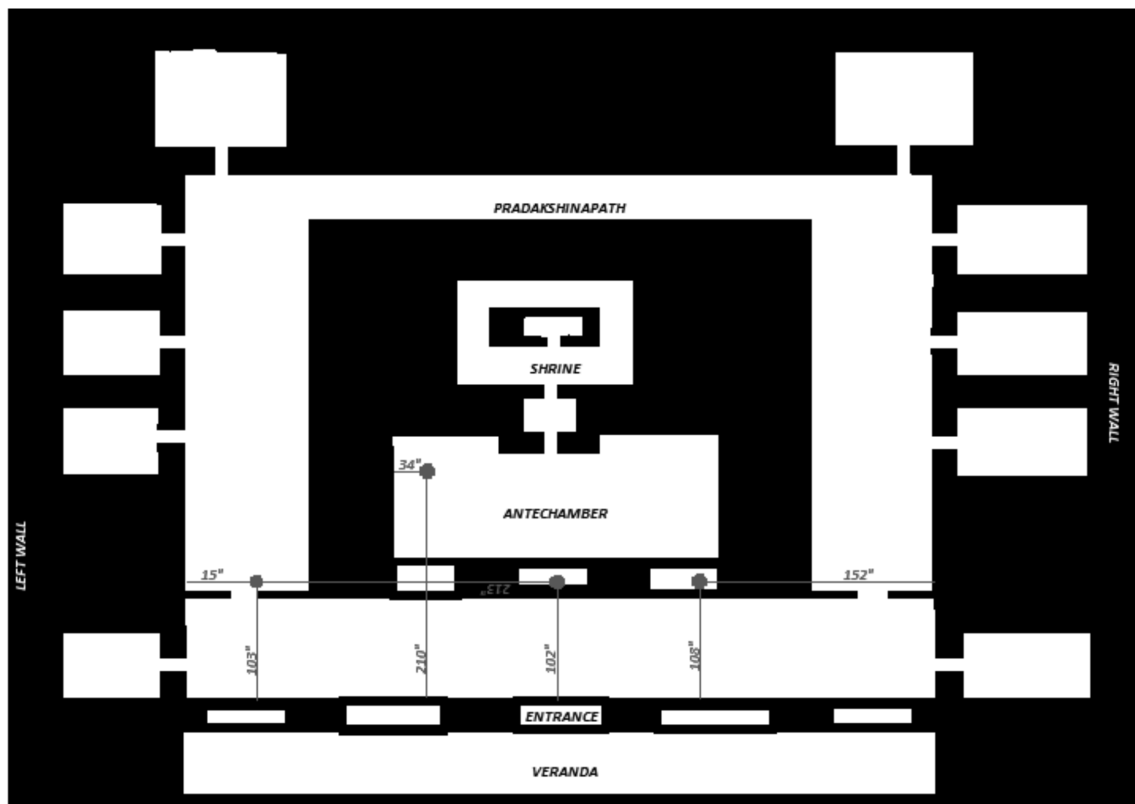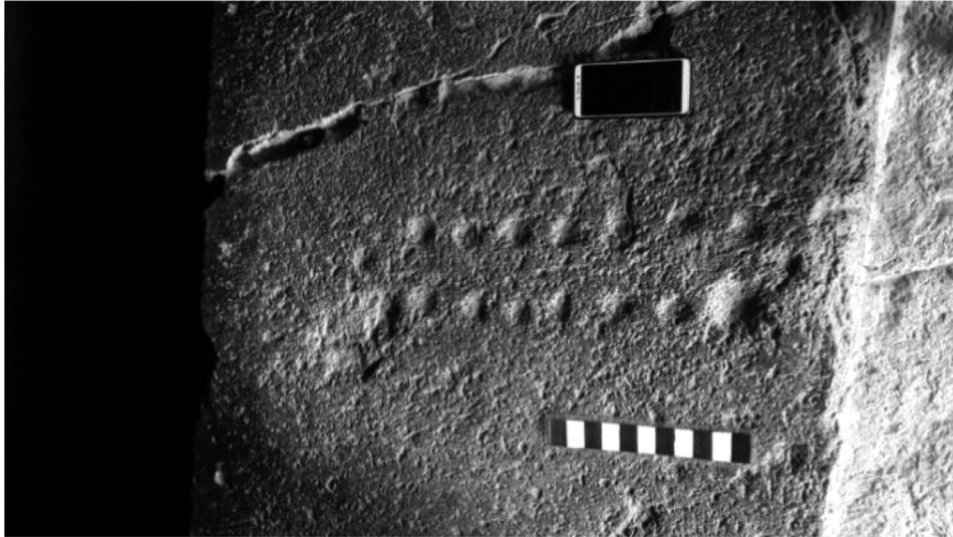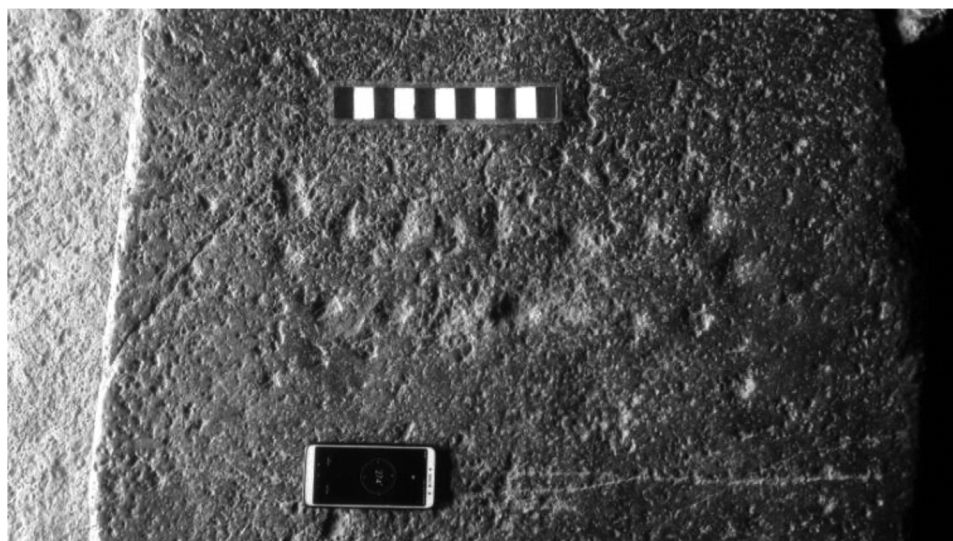
CAVE 6: 1: *mancala 1* **(extreme left)**

CAVE 6: 2: *mancala 2* **(centre on the bench}**

CAVE 6: 3: *mancala* **3 (extreme right)**

CAVE 6: 4: *mancala* **4 (towards the right wall in the antechamber)**

	Location	*Size*	*Condition*
Mancala 1	On the extreme left, 275° West	14-inch, 7 cavities in two rows	weathered and shallow
Mancala 2	On the bench, centre, 274° West	12-inch, 8 cavities in each row	irregular and weathered
Mancala 3	towards the right wall, 143° South-East	20-inch, two rows, 6 cavities (roughly) in each row	extremely weathered
Mancala 4	within the antechamber to the right wall, 167° South	14 inch, 6 cavities in two rows	weathered and shallow

CAVE 6: 5: approx. position of the mancala within the cave

Cave 7

We find three Mancalas in this Cave.
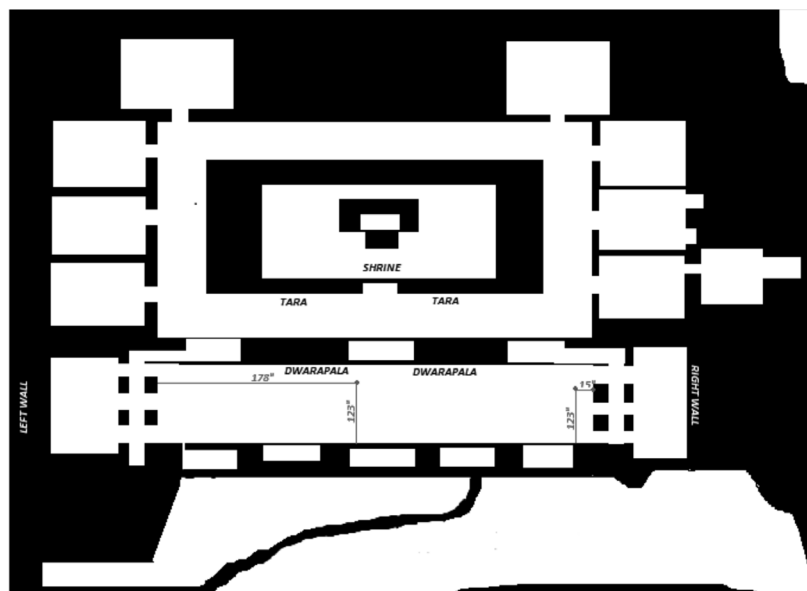
CAVE 7: 4: approx. position of the *mancalas* within the cave

CAVE 7: 1: Image of *mancala* 1

CAVE 7: 2: image of *mancala* 2

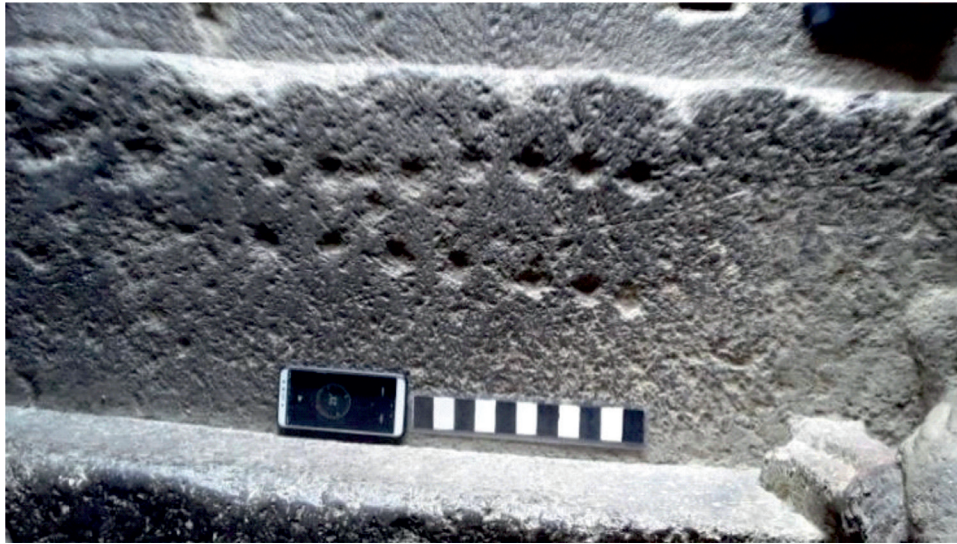**CAVE 7: 3: image of *mancala* 3**

	Location	Size	Condition
Mancala 1	on the doorway, 23° North- East	19.3 inch, 8 cavities each in two rows	weathered and shallow
Mancala 2	towards the right wall on the lower step of the cell, 106° East	15.7 inch, 8+7 cavities in two rows	deep and well-preserved
Mancala 3	on the upper step of the right cell, 106° East.	16 inch, 9+8 cavities in two rows	weathered and shallow

The Game of Mancala

Considered to be a game of African origin, the game of *mancala* is popularly played in many parts of India, especially in the Southern regions. The game is generally played on a board with two rows of 7 pits. These pits are filled with small cowrie shells, seeds, grains, pebbles etc.The number of players depends on the form of the board. Each player takes turns scooping up the contents of a pit and dropping the content into the other consecutive pits till the players' turn is over. The rules regarding when a turn is over changes with game play, depending on the region or the individual pair(s) playing the game.

The game board used for playing *mancala* can differ in the number of pits and rows from region to region. While the traditional board has two rows of 7 pits, it may vary having two rows of 5, 6 or 10 pits. As seen in parts of Western Africa, the game is found having more than 2 rows of pits.

An interestingly similar game called *Sat Gol,* found in central India is played with rules quite similar to that of *mancala*. However the board used to play this game has 7 concentric circles drawn with 3 diameters instead of using pits.

Several other games with similar game play but different boards also exist in other parts of india. In Punjab the game of *kutki Boia* (Dug circles) is played following rules very similar to that of mancala. The board is made of two rows of 5 pits on each side instead of the 7 pits of a traditional *mancala.* In Assam asimilar game is known as *Mawakar katiya* (Hem Chandra Das Gupta,1999), in Sri Lanka it is known as *Chonka,* (Balambal, 2005).

Discussions

All the games that we were able to document in Aurangabad caves were of the *mancala* type. *Mancala* is generally played on a board with 7x2 pits and a certain number of seeds, shells, beads, etc. It is also known as *pallanguzhi, ali guli mane, chenne mane,* etc. (Joshi and Sinha, 2020). The gameplay demonstrates considerable variety from region to region, even though the board and its elements remain more or less constant (Balambal, 2020). The board, as we saw in these caves, can be etched on the floor, or can be made of various materials such as wood and metal. The game is said to be used as a tool to teach basic mathematics and logic to the young kids (Balambal, 2005). *Mancala* is also popularly played by the women of South India especially the women of the working community (Balambal, 2005). The game is popular in many other countries by various names and is played in a variety of fashion depending on the local variation in rules and material availability. It is known as *Alemungula* in the eastern regions of Africa like Sudan and Ethiopia and *Oware* in the West African regions . In places like Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan it is known as Toguz Koorgul whereas in South America it is popularly known as *Kalah* (Balambal, 2020). The game seems to have travelled across the globe, but the striking resemblance can only be a product of exchange through travel and trading communication.

Our inability to find games other than *mancala* is indeed puzzling. Other cave sites yield a variety of board games etched together in groups or individually scattered across. There may perhaps be two reasons for it - (a) the survey was incomplete as several caves were locked and (b) *mancala* may have been popular enough that enough numbers of the boards existed in the past to survive into the future, while the rarer games (if any) have eroded over time. Indeed, in all the papers reporting games from the monuments of Maharashtra (Rane, 2019; Bhosale, 2020; INSTUCEN Trust Consortium, 2020), *mancala* has been a constant presence, though other games have differed in their geographical spread. This attests to the popularity of *mancala* in pre-modern Maharashtra, even though in recent years, the game has completely faded from the memories of people in Maharashtra (Kamath, 2020). A more thorough survey, as and when circumstances permit, might reveal games other than *mancala* at Aurangabad caves.

Conclusion

Cave 6 out of both the Eastern and Western groups shows the maximum concentration of these games, while the rest are scattered in the verandah of other caves though mostly in open spaces such as the *verandahs, mandapas* and the partitions which divide the different sections of the caves (which are low enough for one to sit on).

Despite not finding a direct mention in any ancient text, the location of Aurangabad city being so close to various major trading centres proves that it was an important centre or at least a part of a bigger township. The presence of Aurangabad caves, which is often compared to the likes of Ajanta Caves also directly points to the same conclusion (Qureshi, 1998). Rock cut caves have always been associated with trade routes and the sculptures at Aurangabad provide evidence in their exhaustive detailing. The increasing shift in the form of worship from being exclusive to the monks to being open to the public (Brancaccio, 2000), and the increasing sizes of the *mandapas* to accommodate more and more lay people suggests constant activity in these caves. This naturally brings in the possibility of these games being played in the caves before their abandonment by the original occupants, i.e. the few residing monks and the lay worshippers. After abandonment, the caves must have served the purpose of shelters to passers by and traders and these games would have acted as ice-breakers and conversation starters (e.g. Malaby, 2007) or just as means to pass the time. Another possibility could be that the artisans who were employed in excavating and carving out these caves were the ones who bored these depressions and etched these games on the cave floors when on a break from their tedious work (Dalal, 2020). In many cultures games serve a very important purpose of testing a person's character: a person who stoops to cheat in a game would be seen as naturally deceitful and untrustworthy (Malaby, 2007; Balambal, 2020).

Studying graffiti game boards provides us with an opportunity to have a closer look into past society, understand their culture and the possible interactions of regular people. It gives us more information on the type of economy and trade that revolved around board games. Many oral traditions, myths and legends are only known and passed around through the means of board games (e.g. Claus, 1987). Board games also intertwine with philosophies and culture and have been known to be used for educational purposes (Finkel, 2006). Proper documentation of board games, their physical and oral evidences can provide a look into history from a different perspective. The archaeology of board games in India is, to this day, not a widely studied subject but holds the potential of providing better understanding of the past. However, with only a few monuments out of the thousands in India being protected, while several lay in great danger of being destroyed, the documentation of these graffiti games is an urgent necessity.

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