

Marisa Uberti

# The Merels Board Enigma

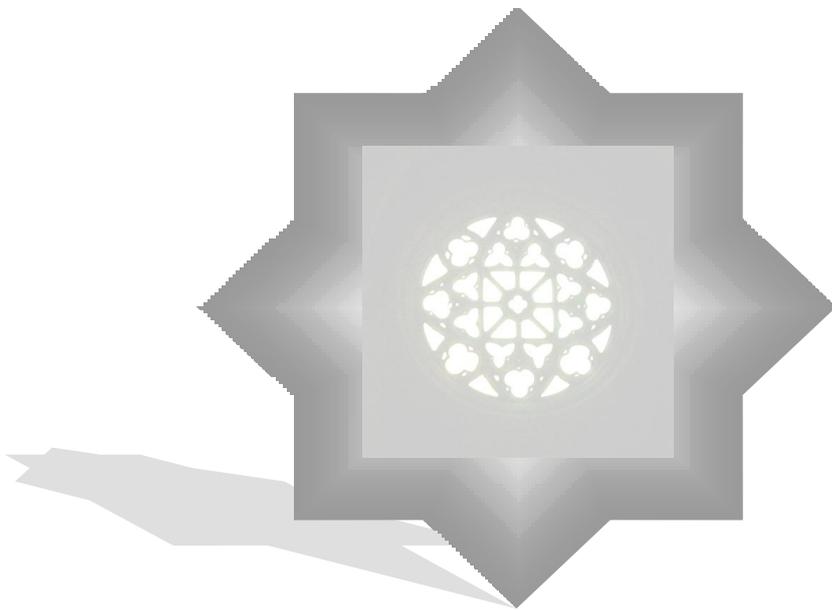
With the worldwide census

Marisa Uberti

## **The Merels Board Enigma**

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*With the worldwide census of Merels Board*



Translation from Italian by Gianluca Toro

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The Authoress is an independent researcher and a member of the Ambrosiano Archaeological Group. She likes travels of discovery and knowledge, archaeology, symbolism, photography. She manages the cultural web-site [www.duepassinelmistero.com](http://www.duepassinelmistero.com), started by her in 2002; she has written numerous articles on the web and in some cultural reviews. By many years, she devotes herself to the subject research of this book and in 2008 she has published, along with G. Coluzzi, a guidebook for the places of the Merels Boards in Italy (Eremon). Marisa lives in Bergamo (Italy).

## PRELIMINARY REMARKS

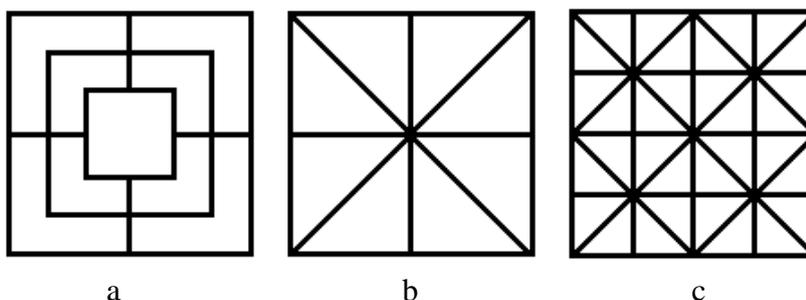
The literature leads us to put in evidence two important schools of thought: the one that considers the Merels Board a game and the one that considers it a symbol. Now, after many years of research, we think that one cannot investigate without considering both the aspects, that cross and complement each other. In antiquity and also afterwards in the learned élites, the ability and strategy games weren't ever played with levity. “*Each game represents a problem of knowledge for which we have to find a suitable solution*”, Josè Luis Echeveste writes in the “Las claves ocultas de los juegos” (The hidden keys of the games). We'll better consider it in the course of this essay.

In Italy, the research meant to investigate the Merels Board is in full development, especially with regard to the symbolic aspect, representing one of its values. But it's very probable that he who was on the point to put the term “Triplíce Cinta” (as the Italians call the Merels Board of type *a*) in the modern virtual search in the web, invariably runs into the few websites (among which there is ours) dealing with it. Nevertheless, it's enough to move in the ludible field to warrant better results. Making a virtue of necessity, one has therefore to enclose a certain dose of cunning, keeping in mind that our subject is known more as a *gaming table*<sup>1</sup> than as a potentially sacred symbol. Thus, one has to set up the searching with the criteria taught by the experience. In fact, different names have been popularly attributed in Italy to the Merels Board (type *a*): *filetto*, *mulino*, *mulinello*, *smerelli*, *trija*, *grissia* or *marredda* (this latter in Sicily). And who knows with how many other epithets it is known at a regional level or in even more little human aggregations. Then, in foreign countries the name is notably different, passing from French *merelle* to English *Nine men's morris* and to the German *Mühlerbrett*, while in Spain Merels Board is locally called *alquerque de nueve* (“square of nine”) and the Italian “tris” and “alquerque” are called respectively *alquerque de tres* (“square of three”, see type *b*) and *alquerque de doce* (“square of twelve”, see type *c*), on the ground of the number of pieces employed in the game and the adopted rules. It's to be noticed that to put three pieces in line, aim of the little merels game or *tres-en-raya* for the Spanish, foresees for these latter to say in a loud voice the Trinity names. Clearly there have to be a hidden reason for this (see chapter 3 paragraph 7).

Even if it seems a negligible fact, the etymology is of basic importance, because if one searches for a word instead of another, one runs the risk of finding absolutely anything and thinking that no one attends to the Merels Board, while things are different at all. In order to find the higher possible number of data, it's therefore very useful to know the denominations given locally to the Italian “filetto”, because unexpected worlds will be opened by searching with the right word. The only care is to translate the respective works written in English, Spanish, French or German, but with a good dose of will and good dictionaries it will certainly not be a big obstacle to “knowledge”.

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<sup>1</sup>The goal is to put three pieces in a row (vertical, horizontal or diagonal). The players are two, each with nine pieces of a colour different from that of the opponent. The game starts putting the pieces outside the game board. In turn, the challengers put the first piece anywhere on the game board, where the lines joining the three concentric squares cross or at the vertex. They go on in this way, considering that they will mind both blocking the attempts of the opponent in putting three pieces in a row and putting them by himself always in a row, thus arranging a *tris*. If the player will succeed in putting three contiguous pieces in any direction allowed by the scheme, he will be able to catch (“eat”) a piece of the opponent. This latter will not be able to place again such piece on the game board anymore. The tris so obtained can no longer be effaced. The pieces can be moved according to precise rules, on an intersection or on a free adjacent vertex. When a player remains with only three pieces, he is allowed to move the piece in any position, also not adjacent to the starting position. The winner will be the player who will be able in leaving the opponent with less than three pieces that can be moved.



From 2008, one of the most important novelties has been the design of a further instrument for data collection (besides the bibliographic and field research), in the form of a blank to be filled in, through which a *feed-back* between the undersigned and my website readers has been set up. Here follows the blank *fac-simile*.

<b>MERELS BOARD CENSUS</b>
<p><b>Attention: in case of more than one located exemplar, fill in a corresponding number of blanks and send them to the e-mail</b>  <b><u><a href="mailto:info@duepassinelmistero.com">info@duepassinelmistero.com</a></u></b></p>
<p><b>Personal data of the signaller</b></p> <p>Christian and family name:.....</p> <p>Contact (email and/or telephone number):.....</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Data on the finding</b></p> <p>Locality:.....</p> <p>Province:..... Region:.....</p> <p>Nation (if different from Italy):.....</p> <p>Kind of building: <input type="checkbox"/> Civil <input type="checkbox"/> Religious <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify):.....</p> <p><b>Brief description of the context</b> (optional but welcome):.....</p> <p><b>Position of the Merels Board:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Horizontal <input type="checkbox"/> Vertical <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify):.....</p> <p><b>Measures:</b>.....</p> <p><b>Photo(s) and/or drawing(s) enclosed:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>In the first case, send the photo(s) separately with a maximum size of 200 KB each</p> <p>If the photo(s) or the drawing(s) isn't (aren't) clear enough, it's indispensable to specify if the exemplar has less than 3, 3 or more than 3 concentric squares:.....and if it has</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Diagonals <input type="checkbox"/> Central hole <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify):.....</p> <p><b>Near presence of other engravings/graffiti or graphic characters (symbols, numbers, letters, marks, etc.):</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>In the first case, which ones? Description:.....</p>
<p>Are there local oral witnesses of persons that remember having played with the Merels Board?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> I don't know</p> <p>Are the specific local names for this scheme? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>In the first case, which ones? List:.....</p> <p>Further free notes:.....</p>
<b>VERY THANKS FOR HAVING COLLABORATED TO OUR CENSUS</b>

The blank can be downloaded from the website of the undersigned<sup>2</sup> and can be accompanied by other iconographic material. In different cases, the signaller has showed a remarkable competence, inserting data not even foreseen in the blank and/or personal impressions evoked by the finding place, historic news, etc., showing an enthusiastic involvement in the present study.

## Acknowledgments

Many persons have supported the achievement of this essay, contributing in various ways. First of all, allow me to thank my son Alessio for the help in some translations of English and Spanish texts, as well as in the final computation of all the exemplars, Angelo Marchetti for the drawings of many exemplars reported in Appendix 1. I express deep gratitude to Gianluca Toro for the translation of the book from Italian to English and for the valuable suggestions while writing. Thanks to all friend researchers for the continual manifestations of esteem and the constant encouragement in believing in this work. I cumulatively thank all those who have pointed out unpublished exemplars: they will find their name and my thanks for each one in the notes of each section of the census. I thank Emanuele Zampetti of Eremon, the Publishing House who has published my first essay (written with Mr. Giulio Coluzzi)<sup>3</sup> on the subject, for his willingness.

Even if I write as a single author, I have adopted the third person plural for personal preference, because I dedicate this Research to all those who have collaborated or feel to be involved in it for different reasons.

For what has meant in the present study, it is required to mention the voluminous work of inventory that had been undertaken in France by the G.E.R.S.A.R.<sup>4</sup> an organization that, between 1995 and 1997, started a project of international census of the “*Triple Enceinte*” (as Merels Board is called in France), presided by Dr. Christian Wagner. Such project was initially developed with very promising results: in fact, discoveries from all over the world, even from the very far away Oceania, were collected, but the project stopped in 1997 and it wasn’t anymore carried on. A thing that we have established to do with some hope. Thanks to Dr. Carlo Gavazzi, that had collaborated to the project for Italy, we have been able to examine thoroughly such basic information that will be mentioned a certain number of times in the course of the present work. We can state having remarkably integrated, extended and enriched that information with more than about one thousand exemplars. In some cases, we have been also able to bring corrections or verify that some pointed out exemplars don’t exist anymore; therefore they have been eliminated from the census. At the end of the ‘90s of the XX century, Dr. Carlo Gavazzi, along with his son Luca, has published a very useful essay<sup>5</sup> on the Italian Merels Boards of Piedmont, Valley of Aosta and Liguria, with a high number of images, surveys, frottages and detailed descriptions, as well as anecdotes and oral witnesses of persons who remember having played...on the stone. Even he has stressed the fact that on some exemplars it’s impossible to play. His bibliography comprises a long list of texts, articles, essays.

Many thanks to Dr. Carlo Gavazzi, who had worked for the G.E.R.S.A.R. in relation to Italy, thanks to whom we were able to examine that basic documentation that will be mentioned several times in

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.duepassinelmistero.com>

<sup>3</sup> Uberti, M. - Coluzzi, G. “I luoghi delle Triplici Cinte in Italia. Alla ricerca di un simbolo sacro o di un gioco senza tempo?”, Eremon Edizioni, 2008

<sup>4</sup> “Group d’Etude, de Recherche et de Sauvegarde de l’Art Rupestre “ (“Group of Studies, Researches and Protection of the Rock-Art”)

<sup>5</sup> Gavazzi, Carlo e Luca “Giocare sulla pietra-I giochi nelle incisioni rupestri e nei graffiti di Piemonte, Valle d’Aosta e Liguria”, Quaderni di Cultura Alpina, Priuli & Verlucca Editori, 1997

the course of this work. We can state that we have considerably integrated, expanded and enriched it with more than a thousand exemplars. In some cases, we were able also to make corrections or verify that some reported engravings no longer exist, therefore they were excluded from the census. At the end of the '90s of the XX century, Dr. Carlo Gavazzi, together with his son Luca, has published a very useful essay on the Merels Boards of Piedmont, Aosta Valley and Liguria, with lots of images, reliefs, rubbings and detailed descriptions, as well as anecdotes and oral witnesses of who remembers having played...on the stone. His bibliography is made up by a long list.

Thanks to Dr. Fabio Gaggia who, in the '80s of the XX century, has attended to the Merels Boards of the Venetian Alpine area (Italy), pointing out more than one hundred ones to the Soprintendenza ai Beni Architettonici di Verona (Italy). He has published different texts (that we'll not forget to mention in the present work) and has tried to put the attention on those exemplars that, because of their position and dimensions (for example, vertical or too little), don't have a ludible function. For us, he represents a person who has validly "initiated" us in the Merels Boards in the area of Verona that, thanks to his suggestions, have obtained the right to be part of our census. He has brought us numerous and interesting exemplars, of which we'll precisely inform in the proper section.

In Germany, we have got in touch with Dr. Friedrich Berger, an author who has drawn the symbolic analysis of the Merels Board near the traditional research, in the "*The Merels Board as a symbol*", self-published in 2003. Being a collaborator of the G.E.R.S.A.R. for different parts of the world, among which the East, afterwards Dr. Berger has kept on closely examining on his own the subject, when the census of Dr. Wagneur has stopped. His work has allowed us to acquire a remarkable amount of bibliographic information and we are pleased to size an opportunity to publicly thank him.

An interesting work is being carried on in France by the researches Hervè Poidevin who, in his blog<sup>6</sup>, has published important articles focused on the *Triple Enceinte*, bringing new data about its possible symbolic meaning, new ideas and photos, inedited for us, photos that we are granted in some cases to publish in this work.

Recently, an interesting research project has been launched in Spain by the archaeologist José Manuel Hidalgo Cuñarro, with the proposal of listing the Medieval gaming-tables of Galicia engraved on stone. As a matter of fact, the project of Hidalgo Cuñarro, who coordinates a research equipe, is extended to all the gaming-tables of the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal). The scholars taking part in it are archaeologists and Ancient and Medieval art historians who will have to draft a list and a detailed study of the located gaming-tables in order to evaluate models (exemplars) not known until now and to put in evidence the variants of the same game. Their curiosity is turned above all to those Medieval religious buildings where the alquerque are very numerous. In the meanwhile, the Spanish archaeologist has designed a virtual area<sup>7</sup> in which the discovered exemplars are presented, thanks also to the collaboration of common persons, persons keen of the subject and researches. In August 2011, we have had the opportunity of meeting Dr. Hidalgo Cuñarro in person and exchanging each other opinions and publications. We also heartily thank him publicly for the support and for having letting us know an interesting work, produced in Portugal in 2004, in conjunction with an exhibition: it is a multimedia catalogue (CD-ROM)<sup>(8)</sup> made by the Department of Mathematics of the Faculty of Science of the University of Lisbon, in collaboration with the Museum of the City of Lisbon and contemporaneously with an exposition concerning Merels Boards, little merels and alquerque in Roman and Medieval contexts, considering their presence on single stones or slabs, or on the other hand in architectonic contexts. The aim of the work has been that of linking mathematics with different human activities, in this case the "game" and other areas of knowledge as archaeology, history, sociology and anthropology. In the preliminary part of the catalogue, it's specified that the game is a very ancient activity that,

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<sup>6</sup> <http://lespierresdusonge.over-blog.com/>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://juegosdetablerosromanosymedievales.blogspot.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Pedras que jogam. Jogos de tabuleiro de outras época", JS Design Production, 2004

being subjected to the rules of “who wins and who loses”, has affinities with a proper mathematic exercise; the sodality between the two Institutions (Department of Mathematics and Museum) has the purpose to demonstrate how this collaboration could aid in laying the foundations of popularization activities of the local historic inheritance and in framing mathematics as science from which human activities has arisen. The very interesting point is that the game, defined in antiquity as a “very serious thing”, not apanage of children, isn’t taken with levity. In that same year, 2004, the First National Championship of Mathematic Games, a kind of Olympiad of the mathematic/abstract games, had started.

## INTRODUCTION

This essay is made up by two parts and two Appendices. More than half is represented by the world-wide census, an integral cataloguing work that represents an absolute novelty since, until today, there were only partial inventories. Moreover, for the first time a statistical analysis with graphs is presented, allowing to set the starting point for the study on the subject, from which to continue for future updatings.

The first part consists in four chapters. In the first one, a complex, detailed and laborious research is presented, focused on the available archaeological witnesses, aimed at throwing light upon the past and the different cultures which have enlivened it, making fall some “commonplaces” about the dating, notable but not too much, of such not figurative and very spread scheme both in rock-art and architecture. In the following chapters we’ll inquire into the folds of the European Middle Ages, when the symbolic game knew its greatest awakening but also the risk of the stake and we’ll try to understand the reasons. Then we’ll get to the heart of an old matter regarding the Templars, visiting the Castle of Chinon where, instead of certainties, many doubts have risen. In the third chapter we have considered numerous contexts in which it is clear that this ludicrous scheme has assumed powerful symbolic meanings, much more important than it’s believed. What does the Merels Board has to do with the death of Christ? Why a Knight of St. John made accurately paint eighty Merels Boards on his own sepulchre, and what’s more intercalated by a mysterious saying? Why the chamberlain of the King of France, Philippe-du-Moulin, made it to be immured in the walls of his own castle in Sologne? And why we find a Merels Board, in vertical, on the throne where 32 sovereigns of the Sacred Roman Empire were crowned? Why it is called “the perfect game of god” in Sri-Lanka? Why we find manifold concentric squares on the bath containers of the new-born babies of the Fulani tribe of Nigeria? These and other questions wait to be discovered and clarified through the pages of this book. The chapter IV is dedicated to the anthropological aspect, as well as to the conservation and protection problem of the engraved Merels Boards. At the end, in the last part of the chapter we’ll consider how the Merels Board has been appropriately renewed until to come to our days, when (not considering the ludicrous use) survives as a recurrent decorative element, apparently unnoticed but as a subliminal message.

The second part is integrally dedicated to the world-wide census. This latter has been carried out thanks to both the bibliography and our investigations on the spot, but also to discoveries of different persons. The data are presented in a series of tables, in which exemplars of Merels Board, with its variants, have been reported along with little merels, alquerque, circular and like chess-board gaming-tables, or formed by cup-marks, where they have been pointed out as linked with the Merel Boards. Table 1 concerns Africa, with the few exemplars we have been able to locate; Table 2 and Table 2bis concern North and South America, respectively; Table 3 concerns Asia and the Middle East; Table 4 concerns Europe (Italy excluded); Table 5 exclusively concerns Italy, that has absolutely revealed the highest number of exemplars. Each table is composed by 6 columns, corresponding to the following data:

- Nation (for Italy, in the first column, it will be found the name of the Region)

- Locality
- Site, that's to say the context and the kind of surface on which the Merels Board is represented;
- Position, that's to say horizontal, vertical, oblique, etc.;
- Type/Model, along with the corresponding image for each context and accompanied by the reference number to be consulted in the corresponding Appendix 1. 100 models numbered from 00 to 99, have been listed; the model number is preceded by the number of exemplars found in that context (if the exemplar is single, no number has been reported);
- Association with similar engravings and/or graffiti or other characteristic elements to point out. The numerous cases of "unknown" exemplars or positions are due to the fact that no further information about them has been found other than the data reported in the bibliography. The reader will notice that the data completeness, in many cases comprising numeric measures and other details, corresponds to an active field research.
  - Appendix 1 gathers all the models from number 00 to number 99.
  - Appendix 2 is reserved for the graphs and the statistical analysis, both from the qualitative and the quantitative point of view, allowing acquiring a concise frame of the present situation of the research. How many Merels Boards are there in the world? How many ones are there only in Europe or in Italy? Which is the prevailing model? Which is the most frequent position one can find? Which are the contexts where the highest number of Merels Boards has been found? These are some of the data that we have tried to make explicit by means of the graphs. 11 graphs concerning the entire world (part A), only Europe (part B) and only Italy (part C) are involved.

The References have been put at the end of each table, so to make easy their consultation. These "notes" report all the reference sources for a given exemplar, being they literary, from the web, investigations on the spot or discoveries of third party persons, these latter singularly receiving our thanks. The final bibliography/webgraphy refers to some useful work to undertake the study of the Merels Board.

In the text were intercalated some boxes to point out some concepts or deepen other. They are distinguished by a different colour for each chapter.

# PART I

## The travel starts!

### - CHAPTER I –

#### Among the time and space mysteries

To establish if the Merels Board is very ancient or less, doesn't change at all our interest in it, on the contrary, it persuades us more and more that much has still to be discovered, a fact that make anything but monotonous or boring attend to it. All that is learned and is divulged represents only a minimal part of the Research in the general sense, because new discoveries, new travel experiences and new evidences are able to modify opinions and "facts" taken as valid until that time. This means *to evolve*, that is to say to process in the knowledge of Things in order to clear up the past that unwinds behind us, and to which we are bound because...nothing breaks off, if we wish: we keep on unwinding it and other individuals will keep on doing it in the future.

#### 1.1) The mystery of the Merels Board antiquity

In the second half of the XX century, a curious exemplar was identified, engraved on a rock of an Epigravettian geological layer (12.000-13.000 years ago), near the Riparo Tagliente (Monti Lessini, Stallavena locality, Grezzana hamlet, Verona, Italy), that recalls in its structure a triple concentric square with perpendicular segments, but not much is left of it. This exemplar could therefore represent the most ancient Merels Board, a very ancient one! Of this exemplar, we have been able to see only a drawing that leaves doubtful (see model n. 68 in the Appendix 1 at the end of this book).

No Merels Board has been dated with scientific methods. Letting apart the cases for which there are witnesses about whom has physically made the engraving in recent epochs (still living persons or persons who remember it), for all the other Merels Boards it's a bold enterprise to provide a dating. The more one goes back in time, the more are the probabilities of running into evaluation mistakes. To all this, the different "schools of thought", maintained by the archaeologists, that confuse rather than clarify the ideas, are added. In fact, there isn't a uniformity of opinions, an agreement on the possible dating. This matter is anything but positive for the Research.

It is of no use to anyone to get hold of distorted data only because "one prefers to leave things as they are". It's often related that the Merels Board is very ancient, that it has been found in Egypt, in China, on Viking ships, neglecting the fact that a temple of Pharaonic epoch is thousands of years old and that between Pharaohs and Vikings there is a certain "temporal abyss".

One thing is that Merels Boards, little merels or alquerque have been indeed engraved in Prehistory, another thing is if this information, become by now a "commonplace", is an opinion not supported by archaeological data.

It doesn't suffice to find such schemes on an Alpine rock to say that they have been made by our far-off ancestors. Not even if they are near other petroglyphs that, considering what they represent (for example, daggers employed in a definite historical period) are indeed prehistoric. In the time when we write, undoubted evidences of so remote exemplars don't subsist. The researches lead to an historic age. When one reads news as "*Exemplars of Merels Board have been found in the ruins of the city of Troy, in Bronze Age burials...*", we question ourselves on the fact if he who writes has a direct knowledge or relates on information got from the literature and "given as expected" (a thing

that we also have done). Has some archaeologist got things down in black and white about having found sites sealed up by millennia with engraved Merels Boards, little merels or alquerque? I would be extremely pleased to know it! As we'll see, also qualified scholars, that represent the bibliographic reference, are fallen into evaluation mistakes, even if in good faith. But it suffices that these Authors had divulged their data and we all take them as "pure gold". On the other hand, one has to trust someone, or not? This is one of the reasons why the undersigned considers essential the "field" research, the direct record of a finding, because this comes before interpretation. Unfortunately this isn't always possible, just for those engravings that are pointed out in parts of the world we haven't reached and, perhaps, never could reach.

It would be necessary to know if the above mentioned engravings were there when Schliemann discovered the ruins on the hill of Troy, if he has described and recorded them, if someone else has done it for the Bronze Age burials and could subscribe that the little merels or alquerque schemes are unequivocally coeval<sup>9</sup>. It would be a big step. But also to be able to establish when the Merels Boards scratched or engraved on the Valcamonica rocks (Italy) were made, would be an extremely useful datum. In the Camunian rock-art of Valcamonica there are -besides thousands of other figurations- circles, squares, crossed wheels, mysterious grids (proper chess-boards of which no one knows the true function), little merels, Merels Boards, alquerque... But when have they been made? Take, for example, the figure below: an anthropomorph with enigmatic rays around the head seems on the point of "doing something" at a side of a grid, that is remarkably bigger than him. What does he is doing? What does the grid represents? We cannot evade considering that, in the traditional symbolism, the "radiated crown" is in relation to individuals and beings with a certain importance (for example, divine beings or saints).



**Fig. 1.** Park of the Rock Engravings of Naquane in Valcamonica (Capo di Ponte, Brescia), rock n. 50, grid with 7x 8 cells: on the right, an anthropomorph with "rays" on the head seems on the point of "doing something" at the edge of the grid

On the same rock there are figurations of different kind, both figurative (as armed horsemen and horses, foot-prints) and geometric and about ten inscriptions, these latter being very rare in Valcamonica in comparison with the amount of engravings of other kind. The experts have verified that they are Etruscan alphabetical characters, introduced in the Alpine chain from the VI-V century B.C. and fitted to the specific phonetic requirements of the language spoken in the area.

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<sup>9</sup> See paragraph 1.2



**Fig. 2.** A Camunian inscription and an unusual figure of “warrior” whose square trunk shows an evident central point and some rays, a figure very similar to a little merels

Along with all these elements, on the extent of this natural “black-board”, also appear a Merels Board and an alquerque, clearly drawn with a different technique (graffito).



**Fig. 3.** Merels Board engraved on the rock n. 50



**Fig. 4.** An alquerque scratched on the rock n. 50

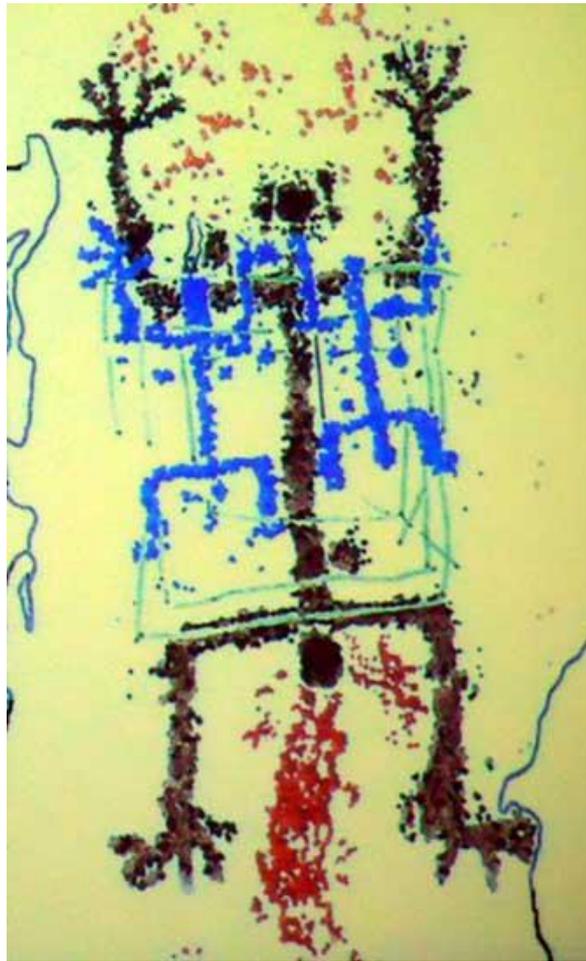
It's highly improbable that the two representations, even if one is close to the other on the same rock, don't belong to the same epoch. In any case, the slope of the rock on which they are, personally recorded by us, would not have allowed lying neither Merels Boards nor multiple *little merels*...

A very interesting iconography for the present study is that referred to the rock-art site of Campanine di Cimbergo, always in Valcamonica. Here the equipe of Prof. Umberto Sansoni has identified a rather enigmatic engraving of Merels Board, about which we don't want to throw ourselves into speculative comments, because it would be easy, supported by enthusiasm. We limit ourselves to describe the context, that we have recorded on the other hand, thanks to the disposability of the researcher Maurilio Grassi who has guided us *in loco* in March 2011, otherwise to find the rock n. 16 would have been difficult. With the due permissions requested in advance and granted us, we have been also able to take photos of the engravings, but they are so faint that, once the images have been seen on a personal computer, the inadequacy for publication has been ascertained. Therefore we have to go back to a photo taken during the lecture given by Prof. Sansoni and Silvana Gavaldo in Brescia (October 2010, Museo di Scienze Naturali). The rock is placed on a slope in an area not very accessible to visitors. In a sort of cavity there is a figuration interpreted as the "Great Mother", a female image (highlighted in black in the photo) with bigger than normal dimensions and attributes of unusual power as big hands and feet. Upon this image a man-woman couple has been engraved. The woman has a big hand and Prof. Sansoni has ideally bring back the couple to a primordial couple (perhaps representing the entire mankind), voluntarily inserted in the already existing context of the Great Mother, who is linked with the couple by the universal tie of motherhood. Around there are figures of orants<sup>10</sup>. As the reader will be able to notice, the graffito of a Merels Board is present in the scene. Prof. Sansoni doesn't have put it apart, but he has reserved for this "presence" a highly symbolic value and not a ludible one. Actually, the stages of the engraving aren't contemporary: the Great Mother has been made before (probably in the Iron Age), afterwards the couple of orants has been engraved upon it, and the Merels Board would seem having been engraved at the end. It's clear that we'll never know when or why, not

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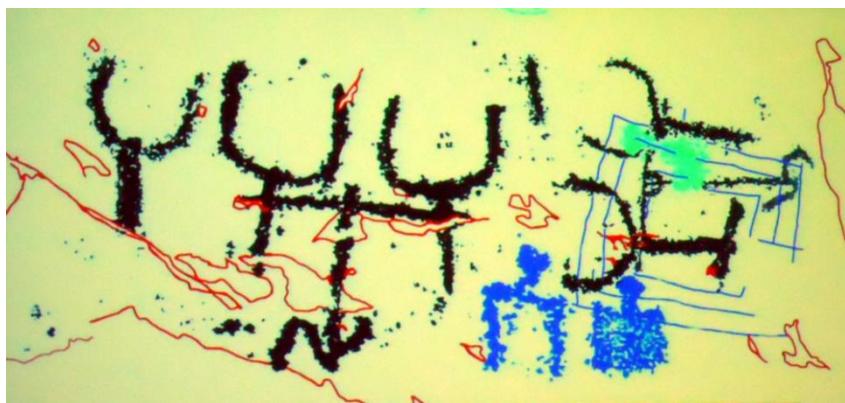
<sup>10</sup>For further information, see: "Lucus Rupestris. Sei millenni d'arte rupestre a Campanine di Cimbergo", Umberto Sansoni and Silvana Gavaldo (Cur.), Edizioni del Centro, Capo di Ponte, 2009, also Sansoni U., "La 'Grande Madre' di Campanine", in *Archeologia Viva*, Anno XV, n. 56., Marzo-Aprile 1996, p. 10.

even by whom. But it's important to number this exemplar among the not ludicrous ones that we know.



**Fig. 5.** A Merels Board in a sacred context

In the same Park of the Rock Engravings of Campanine di Cimbergo, on the rock n. 8, there is another exemplar of Merels Board, this time in an agricultural context, engraved upon a plough. The age of the Merels Board hasn't been determined, but we are able to hypothesize that not even this one was of use as a ludible support, as fig. 6 well illustrates:



**Fig. 6**

These iconographies don't allow us to date the Merels Board, nor to qualify it as "prehistoric". Now we consider some other contexts, in which the idea of the four directions and of a centre is clear and often linked with "solar wheels" by scholars.

In October 2009, we went on the mountains that dominate the inhabited place of Bressanone (Bolzano, Italy), in Scezze locality (*Tschötscher Heide*) in order to record a famous exemplar of Merels Board on a rock outcropping from the ground, at an altitude of about 300 m on the sea level. *In loco*, this Merels Board is recognized as gaming-table and is named *Mühlerbrett* or *mill-table*<sup>11</sup>. The age of such engraving is unknown, but according to our modest opinion it isn't very ancient: it could be Medieval or even more recent. The grooves are deeply engraved on the rock, as if a metal pointed tool has been employed; the exemplar has diagonals and a big hole in the middle, 3-4 cm in depth. When we visited the site, the hole was full of water, probably because of the rain in the preceding days.



**Fig.7.** Looking at the engraving, up on the right a kind of quadrangular "appendage" is visible, likely joined to the Merels Board. What does it mean?



**Fig. 7 a:** The natural context in which the Merels Board is engraved, pointed out by the arrow

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<sup>11</sup> See also Uberti M.-Coluzzi G., cit., pp. 27 and 35.

The rock is placed in a woody environment, not far away from the present carriage road, and is composed by different surfaces covering some plain square metres. While the rest of the greyish rocks are rather spoiled, with evident moss growing, wild herbs penetrating the breaks of the rock, lichens and dust and vegetals deposits, the area where the Merels Board is placed is evidently clean. The colour immediately around the Merels Board is clearer, a sign that it is regularly cleaned. According to some witnesses, persons still played on it with slate pebbles until not much time ago. We know that the exemplar is very popular: in 2008 it was chosen and published on the calendar cover produced by Circolo Arca Bressanone and titled "*The mysterious cup-marks in the valley of Bressanone seen in the enchantment*".

The exemplar was showed in a highly evocative quality: a photomontage allowed to symbolically making a lively fire get out from the hole, arousing the impression that that was the nature power giving off from the earth and that, in some way, the Merels Board was its dumb revealer or bearer. In short, something more than a simple gaming-table, but certainly only at a creative, imaginative level, nothing excluding. The accompanying explanation says: "*One of the numerous representations of an ancient Merels Board or mill) present in the place along with other elements., A cup-mark has been obtained in the middle of the tria, that could be linked with usages in relation to the fire, as fancifully illustrated in the evocative image*". Which usages? To what epoch it is referred? To define it as "ancient" is a bit too generic.

That it was something more than a mill-table was supposed, in his time, also by Peter Kolosimo, while the Berlinese archaeologist Marie P. Köenig supposed that a stick was inserted in the hole, making the Merels Board a kind of sun-dial. But going in the place, we have been able to verify that a stick doesn't stand upright in the hole at all, unless fixing it with gluing materials, because the hole isn't enough deep. Moreover, in this area the sun doesn't filter during many hours of the day, being the all around vegetation thick. Then, it's highly probable that once the vegetation was more extended (surely many trees have been employed in order to make the present street that runs at the edge of this area). What the Merels Board had to astronomically mark, is therefore still to understand. Searching for information, we have discovered that not far away from here, always in *Tschötscher Heide* locality, but on a different rock, there would be a group of cup-marks that imitates the constellation of the Little Bear, in a context of petroglyphs comprising isolated cup-marks, Christian symbols and Merels Boards.

One has also to remember that in the mountain area of Bressanone there are numerous rock-art sites with different engravings, from cup-marks to solar symbols, to Merels Boards (but on the antiquity of these latter we cannot compromise ourselves): we'll mention as examples the so-called *Rock of the water* in Velurno-Drumbühel, that counts more than 700 cup-marks (not far away the prehistoric fortification Drumbühel rises); the rock of Via Novacella, that is one of the rare examples of rock with cup-marks directly next to the course of the Isarco river (perhaps once more displaced than is now?) and surely among the most mysterious and interesting ones (cup-marks groups are placed around the vertices of an hexagon, in the middle of which there is another cup-mark, while other ones -in groups of nine- are irregularly placed on the rest of the rock, covering a surface of several square metres); the rock of Elvas-Kreuzplatte, characterized by the presence of an evident "slipway of fertility" (also called "slipway of the witches", very smoothed by the continuous rubbing and slipping of persons (some cup-marks have also been scraped off because of this fact: they composed a square of nine points, or on the other hand three rows of cup-marks on three columns, that can also be drawn near a rough gaming-table, even if this rock has a highly inclined position). We have to stop here with the examples, not before having stressed as all these rocks are on ancient routes, no more frequented today. We can hypothesize that some engravings are indeed very ancient (pre-Roman), but can we consider the other ones, as the Merels Board before above described, of the same epoch? The doubt remains. We'll add that, in the Romanic cloister of Bressanone cathedral, there are some consumed slabs with various cup-marks, which could be out of context, that is to say coming from other places. But there are also rather consumed Merels Boards on some slabs: such

slabs make the local scholars curious because they aren't made of the material generally employed locally, the phyllade.

### **Going back in the millennia.....**

where memory can travel arm-in-arm along with the legends that have been handed down to us, one will remember the mythical isle of Atlantis<sup>12</sup>, structured as a circular scheme of 5 fences of earth and water linked with straits, where one lived as nabobs, in a kind of Golden Age, to be dated back to about 9.000 years B.C. Unfortunately, the isle was submerged in a single day, under the axe of a sudden catastrophe. Searched for and located nearly everywhere, according to the description of Plato, or better according to the current interpretation, Atlantis had to be “beyond the Pillars of Hercules”, therefore beyond Spain and Portugal. According to many, that geometric structure, along with the residence of Poseidon in the middle, image of perfection, would to be intended as an initiatic way with subsequent levels on which all the initiatic societies are based. The Atlantis model, lasted in the collective memory of those who remained and handed down through the stone, would have been immortalized in some archaic rock petroglyphs, in the form of concentric circles or structures identified as labyrinths. Afterwards, it would have also assumed the features of our Merels Board. Beyond the surely fascinating character of this thesis, certain evidences haven't ever been found. But it's surely interesting to ask oneself by whom and why particular sets of concentric circles (also with rather remarkable dimensions, always with a big “centre”, from which one or more “canals” depart) have been traced in undefined epochs (but probably prehistoric) in many areas of the Western Atlantic side (Ireland, England, Brittany, Portugal and Spain, in particular in Galicia). Their structure is indeed interesting and we show a couple of examples from Galicia<sup>13</sup> in the figg. 8-9. These concentric circles, that are the most numerous and characteristic motifs of the rock engravings in the North-West of the Iberian peninsula, can be of the most simple kind, configured as a single ring (with or without a central cup-mark), or as a more complex structure taking all the supporting surface. The most numerous model is represented by compositions with two up to six concentric rings with a central cup-mark and an entry/exit groove (canal). Nevertheless, exemplars composed by more rings are known, as in the case of Monte Tetòn of Tebra (Tomiño-Pontevedra), in which there are no less than 18 concentric rings! Sometimes there are cup-marks in the circles, or these latter are divided by grooves directed towards the four directions. Still other times, these grooves come out from the scheme and end in other more little concentric circles. Although they have been well investigated by archaeologists, the true meaning of these hand-made works isn't clear at all. In the same geographical area, there is also the more extensive diffusion of engraved labyrinths, famous all over the world for its spectacular beauty and stylistic precision (and for which we send to chapter 3.5).

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<sup>12</sup>The Greek philosopher Plato (428/27-347 B.C.), in the ‘Timaeus’, speaks of the capital city of Atlantis saying: “One of the primordial human being, born from the earth, had his residence on this mountain; his name was Evenor and had a wife called Leucippe and they had a single daughter, Cleitus. The girl was already a woman when her father and mother died; Poseidon fell in love with her and, breaking off the earth, he surrounded the hill on which she lived, forming alternate areas of earth and water, the ones concentric with the others. There were two areas of earth and three of water, circular as if worked with the minting die, having each one a circumference equidistant in each point from the centre, so that no one could reach the isle, because ships and navigation still didn't exist”

<sup>13</sup>Hidalgo Cuñarro, José Manuel-Costas Goberna, Fernando Javier, “Los motivos geometricos en los grabados rupestres prehistoricos del continente europeo”, Asociacion arqueologica viguesa, Serie Arqueologica Divulgativa, n. 2, 1996, p.119 (photo n. 8). Hidalgo Cuñarro, José Manuel-Costas Goberna, Fernando Javier-Antonio de la Peña Santos, “Arte Rupestre no sur da Ria de Vigo”, Instituto de Estudios Vigueses, 1999, p.97 (photo n.9).



**Fig. 8:** concentric circles to “Lase das Rodas” (Muros- A. Coruña)



**Fig. 9:** concentric circles to “Outeiro do Lombo da Costa” (Sacos, Cotobade)

Going back to the subject of the “gaming-tables”, one has to acknowledge that some ancient games played with pieces made of datable material have been found, but no one seems similar to our Merels Board. For example, the English archaeologist Sir Charles Leonard Woolley found five identical gaming-tables (of which three were miraculously integral) in the excavations of the royal burial-ground of Ur in Chaldea, the ancient capital city of the Sumerian Reign, now in Southern Iraq. Their dating is placed after 2560 B.C. Today, the three gaming-tables, complete of pieces and dice, are kept in the British Museum of London. The *game of Ur*, as it is commonly known, is one of the forerunners of the modern Backgammon<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, the findings of the gaming-tables are never accompanied by the rules those ancient peoples played with them. The experts deduce these rules on the base of comparisons with the most similar present gaming-tables.

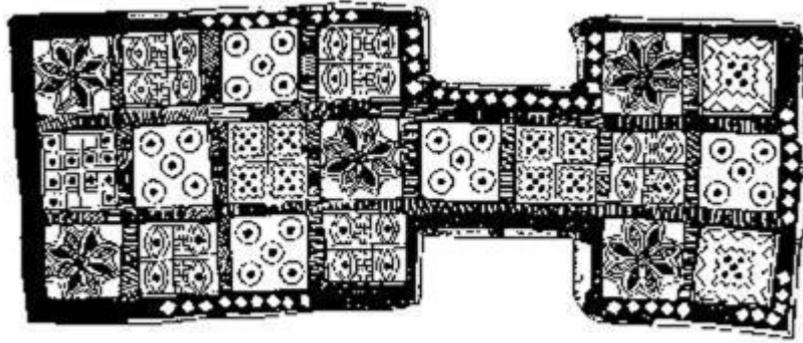


Fig. 10: One of the gaming-tables found in Ur

Moreover, we have casually noticed a structure very similar to that of the multiple little merels:

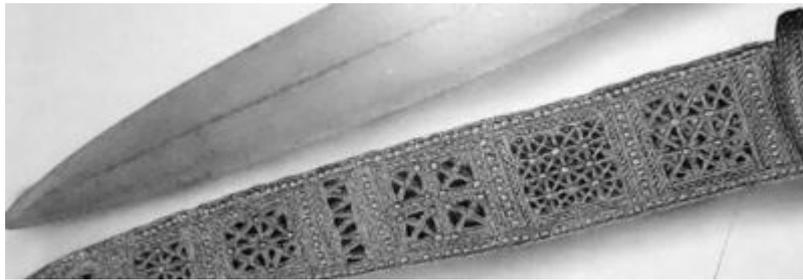


Fig. 11: Objects found in Ur and kept in the Iraq Museum of Baghdad

These findings cannot be disproved because they pertain to official excavations and are duly accompanied.

They give us the dating and tell us that such *conceptual* scheme was known in that culture, at that time. The rest is free conjecture.

Also the tomb paintings could be a source of information for us, because they would witness ludicrous practices actually adopted by that culture.

But were the Merels Boards, the little merels and the alquerque known 3000 years before Christ, or not?

Surely, these schemes could have been obtained out of different other ones. After all, if I divide a square (or a circle) with a cross, I obtain a scheme to place three pieces in line (in English, this scheme is known as *Three-Men's Morris*); if I add two diagonals, I obtain the classical little merels; if I multiply this latter scheme, I obtain an alquerque of the desired size; if I inscribe other two squares, I obtain a Merels Board (with diagonals and full cross, for example see model number 37 on the Appendix 1, the imagination of man isn't a mere trifle... If then, as one would like to verify, there is a symbolic purpose in the round of a game, one has to understand which it is.

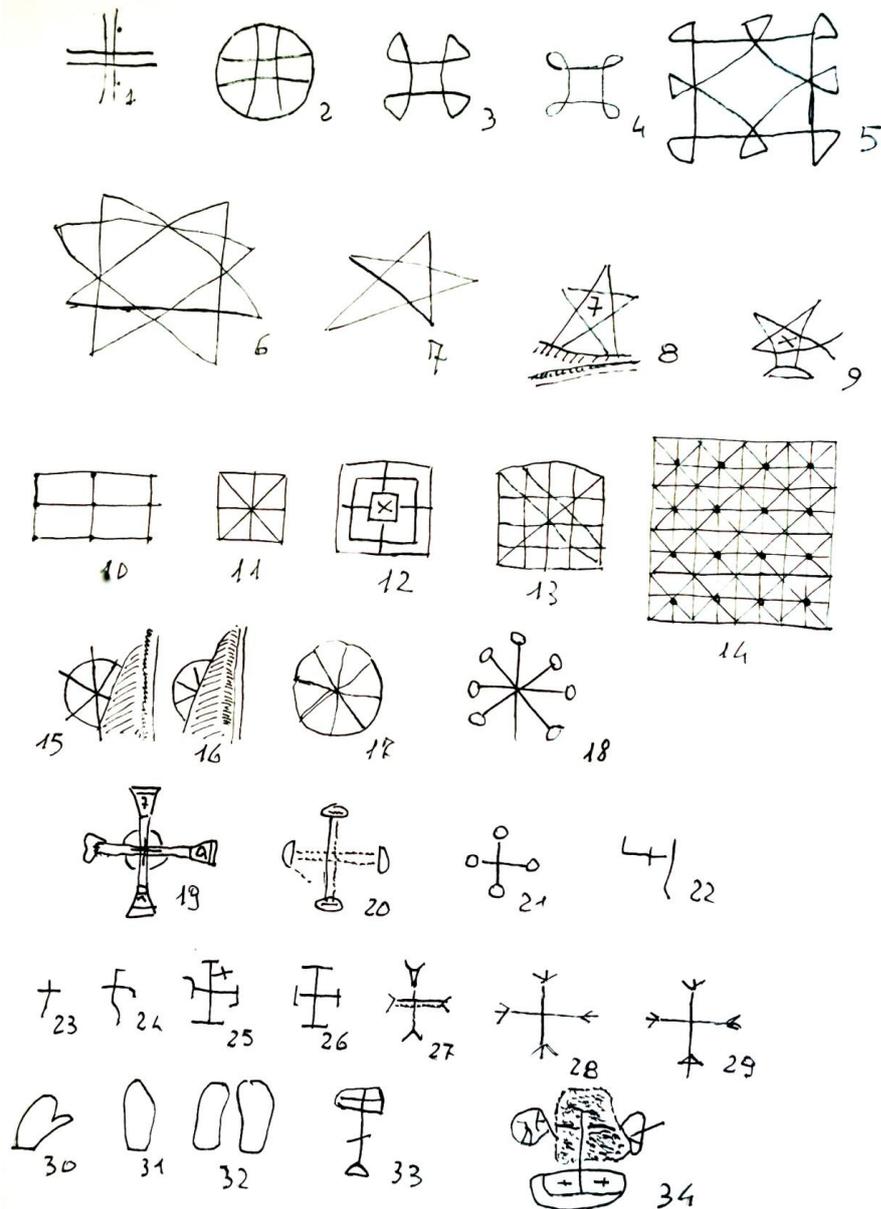
## 1.2) In Egypt but not...of the Ancient Egypt?

The searching for and the finding of new data<sup>15</sup> have allowed us to acquire enlightening elements of opinion regarding the exemplars of Merels Boards scratched on the stones of the temple of Qurna, west of the present small town of Luxor (the ancient western Thebes). I refer to some considerations proposed by Dr. C. Wagneur in his inventory of "*La Mystérieuse Triple Enceinte*"<sup>16</sup>. The study, written in French, keeps some initial pages just for the problem of the dating of these graffiti with particular care of the Merels Board, object of his list. A thing very useful for us, the study also

<sup>15</sup> For which I have to thank Dr. Carlo Gavazzi.

<sup>16</sup> C. Wagneur for the GERSAR, Association Loi de 1901 - Mairie de Milly - La-Forêt 91490, 1995.

shows the 34 drawings of the complete series of the represented exemplars<sup>17</sup>. One can tell that there is the whole inventory of the symbols known also in the West, as knots or interlacings of various shape, five- or eight-pointed stars, radiated circles, crosses with different shapes, profiles of the “sandals of the pilgrim” kind and some other not well identifiable object. There is also a Merels Board with perpendicular segments and a central cross, moreover the little merels and alquerque schemes and a square with an inscribed cross are represented, beside a rather unusual scheme to be found, that’s to say a square divided in 16 other little squares, on which diagonals are traced without an apparent arrangement (perhaps an unfruitful attempt to make an alquerque?). The drawing below can surely let the reader a suitable evaluation:



**Fig. 12.** The complete series of graffiti of the temple of Qurna, as documented by H. Parker in 1909 (drawn by us).

<sup>17</sup>According to the scholar Henri Parker, who first examined and described the engravings of Qurna in “Ancient Ceylon”, 1909, finding a marked analogy between the Merels Board here discussed and the one he had seen in the site of Mihintale et Lankarama, where it was called Nerenchi. The monumental work of Parker consists of no less than 700 pages.

As for the exemplars investigated by us, they are generally identified as very ancient, coeval with the temple on which they are. According to such fact, the Egyptians of that time would have known them. The construction of the temple began under the Pharaoh I (about 1312-1298 B.C.) and was completed under his son Ramses II (about 1298-1235 B.C.) and is more or less 3200 years old!<sup>18</sup>

Three main problems arise. The first one is that, during all this time, Egypt underwent a series of dominations (Persian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab), the coming in of the Coptic Christian Church<sup>19</sup> and to single out in which epoch the graffiti were made is very difficult. Secondly, the same temple underwent various damages and consequent restorations, during which whoever would have been able to make various marks. The third, and perhaps most interesting fact, is that other representations of Merels Boards, little merels or alquerque don't exist in the games of ancient Egypt, neither on fictile material nor on paintings, sculptures or otherwise<sup>20</sup>. All these evaluations would lead one to hypothesize that the people of the Pharaohs didn't know the Merels Board and that the graffiti of the temple of Qurna are subsequent to the end of the royal Dynasties. Nevertheless, the ancient Egyptians knew the gaming-tables, as the paintings in the tomb of Nefertari (wife of the Pharaoh Ramses II) attest, in which the Queen is betting her destiny with the *Senet*. We have other witnesses, as a complete set for draughts dated back to the pre-Dynastic period (before 3000 B.C.!) found in El-Mahash and kept in the Museum of Bruxelles. *"The game played in ancient Egypt -Francesco Lepore informs us- had in common with today's draughts only the draughtboard and the pieces. We aren't able to establish analogies between the ancient Egyptian game and that of today's draughts, because the papyri of the period, even if they retain the images of the players, don't report the rules in a complete and clear way. According to the German scholar Videmann the greater difficulty would lie in the "mystical" language used by the Egyptians, even when they "spoke of simple matters". Probably the rules to catch the pieces of the opponent were similar to those of today's draughts, but the pieces moved on lines and not on squares"*.

Wagneur, in his Inventaire, critically examines the reports of the scholar Parker (*"Ancient Ceylon"*, 1909) and those of H.J.R. Murray (*"A history of board-games other than chess"*, 1951). First of all, he points out that, while the first mentions no less than 34 engravings on the covering of the temple of Qurna in 1909, Murray -more than 40 years later- mentions only 7 of them (those marked with the numbers 7,10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17 in fig. n.12), ascribing them a ludible function. Moreover, on p. 19 of his work Murray shows the little chess-board as composed not by 16 little squares as in the drawings of Parker, but by 25 ones, and with two diagonal segments crossing it, while Parker drew them in a different way. Both these authors stated that the schemes were "probably" coeval with the temple. Indeed, after having read the passages of Parker reported by Wagneur, one evicts that he was convinced of the fact that the graffiti would have been made by the builders (or others) before the laying of the stones. This is because of some "breaking off" of the graffiti corresponding to the

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<sup>18</sup> Even if about one hundred years more or one hundred years less is a not important span of time in the millenary history of the Ancient Egypt, we think it's important to make clear the following matter. Both Parker and Murray have erroneously dated back the monument to a preceding epoch; in fact, they thought that the construction began under the Pharaoh Ramesse I (1400-1366 B.C.) and completed under his son Seti I (1366-1333 B.C.). Probably, this is due to the not refined as today Egyptology studies. Unfortunately, their 'mistake' keep on with being reported, and it's for this reason that it is very frequent to find the date of the XIV century as that of the erection of the monument. These are typical 'copy-and-paste' phenomena which also we run across, but they immediately stand out after a more detailed review of the literature and above all considering the archaeological data one has at present. It is dutiful to apologize and settle matters.

<sup>19</sup> National Church founded after the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) that have condemned the monophysism. Its head is the Patriarch of Alexandria (from the II century A.D. he resides in The Cairo). It's a matter of Egyptian Christians, distinguished from the Orthodox Christians and Muslims; they don't recognize the ecumenical councils nor the authority of the Pope.

<sup>20</sup> There are many representations of radiated circles, in astronomical (for example, toms) or military (for example, war chariots) contexts, but they aren't gaming tables.

stones cut, made -according to Parker- when the same stones were placed on the temple ceiling. For him, this fact would be a “preuve absolue”, an “absolute evidence”, but soon after he speaks of “probabilities” that’s to say the *probability* that they could be dated back to the period in which the temple was built, set by him in the XIV century B.C. The use of the term “probabilities” allows Wagneur the liberty of doubting this theory. This doubt becomes stronger if one considers that Murray reports the same considerations as Parker on the stones cut, perhaps faithfully trusting his analysis, and employed the same concept of probability when it is a matter of dating them back to the same period. Substantially, Murray didn’t ever see those engravings in person, but he only refers to the study of H. Parker. According to Wagneur, they are subjective opinions; in fact, the ceiling crumbled down during the course of the centuries and the stones employed to restore the roof could be re-used ones. But in support of his doubts, the scholar advises to observe the cross in the middle of the Merels Board: Parker describes it as a cross with “forked” arms, while Murray as a “potentiate” cross. This fact would represent a big difference, because the former cross is Coptic and the latter one is known at least from the Neolithic period. Moreover, Wagneur underscores that other crosses included in a census by Parker can be brought back to the Coptic art: for example, the graffito identified by Parker with n. 21 (fig. 12) is found on Coptic game counters, n. 27 is found on a Coptic game box and also n. 28 and n. 29 are of the same period, not previous. Such considerations lead Wagneur to think that the age of the graffiti of the temple of Qurna cannot be dated back to an epoch before IV- V century A.D.

It is clear that it would be of help to establish a time beyond which it is useless to go; from the Coptic period on, also a later period could therefore be sound and acceptable, as the Roman, Byzantine or Medieval period in which the Crusades took place ...

It only remains to wait for the moment of being able to document *de visu* in the near future, also because it seems that some collaborators of Wagneur (that reported to him about some visits to the temple of Qurna between 1986 and 1994) had found a situation completely different from that described by Parker and Murray.

A little surprise for the persons keen on the subject: the already mentioned H. J. Murray, one p. 54 of his work “*A history of board-games other than chess*”, writes that there are different gaming-tables on the top of the Great Pyramid of Giza, scratched by the Arab guides; they are described as chess-boards composed by 5 x 5, 7 x 7 and 9 x 9 cells. At present, it is forbidden to go up on the top of the pyramid of Cheops (otherwise known as *Great Pyramid*), but if someone was there, we will be very happy to have information. Moreover, similar engravings have been sporadically put in evidence on the temple of Denderah (650 km from Cairo) but without specifying neither the typology nor the location, therefore so generic discoveries are useless.

The scholar Sergio Marchi reports a new, however in a conditional mood, according to which alquerque schemes would have been found in some tombs in the necropolis of Giza, dated back to 2300 B.C.<sup>21</sup>. Around the VII century A.D., the Arabs conquered the Egypt, that was in the hands of the Byzantines, and would consequently have exported such scheme in the European countries invaded by them, among which the Iberian Peninsula (VIII century A.D.). With the *Reconquista* of the XIII century, military ranks, as that of the Templars quartered in Catalonia, would have borrowed and spreaded the alquerque all over Europe from the Iberian Peninsula. But who has seen and, even better, documented the engravings in the tomb of Giza? Were they intact or already despoiled? Are we sure that the engravings of the alquerque were original, or that they were engraved during the very long period of dominations following the Pharaonic epoch?

The Egyptians have left us many images on this subject, besides some proper gaming-table with pieces and dice. For example, the Senet game dates back to 3300 B.C. It’s a kind of chess-board composed by 30 cells (three lines of ten squares each), on whose back there is another game, the *Tjau o Tkhou* (or game of the twenty cells). From the first Pharaonic Dynasties (at least from the III

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<sup>21</sup>The new has been confirmed during a personal conversation with the scholar, who has told us that the exemplars would be found in the British Museum.

Dynasty, about 2800-2600 B.C.) comes another game called *Mehen* (hieroglyph *mhn*, meaning “rolled up snake”). Its shape is as a spiral, sometime oriented clockwise, but generally counter-clockwise, and a snake head is represented in the middle of the gaming-table. It remembers an uroboros, that’s to say the snake biting its tail, and alchemical symbol of cyclicity/rebirth/eternity. Today, the soundest theory about the function of this object states that it was a ritual game, reserved for the dead. It is similar to the Senet: the dead played a match, the decisive one, against the snake as a metaphoric subject and had to win in order not to be bitten and die a second time. Surely, this “second death” sacred more than the physical death, and this is demonstrated by the broad variety of the funerary iconography in the Egyptian world and by the whole of magical formulas which was impossible to give up. The most ancient model of game board seems to belong to the tomb of Hesy (necropolis of Saqqara), in which the gaming-table has been painted with six lion-headed pieces and six spherical stones. Numerous exemplars of *Mehen* have been brought to light. From their structure, it has been possible to argue that they could be hanged on the wall or be upright. There were variants, in fact someones are composed by forty cells and others by eighty cells or more. According to the experts of the field, this game disappeared from the Egyptian society at about 2300 B.C. and appeared again in the near Mediterranean areas, as in the island of Cyprus, from which analogous gaming-tables dated back to 2.000 a. C. come. besides the sarcophag



Fig. 13

During a recent visit to the collection of Egyptian antiquities in the Egyptian Museum of Turin (January 2012), we have observed some findings in which the multiple concentric squares were clearly used in the decoration of objects (everyday or ritual use?) found in graves. It is the matter of a little box found in the inviolate tomb of Kha and his wife Merit, lived at the time of the Pharaoh Amenhotep III (about 1.400 B.C.). Kha was chief architect for the work of the necropolis of Dehir-el-Medina, at the service of the Pharaoh. Their tomb was discovered northern of that town in 1906 by the Italian Egyptologist Ernesto Schiaparelli. The tomb had never been visited by thieves, therefore it was considered one of the most important discoveries of the century. In it there were, besides the sarcophagi of the couple, 506 objects were examined, constituting a museum by itself. In our study, it is interesting to add that a perfectly preserved wooden exemplar of the game of Senet for two persons was found. But in particular we have to focus on a little wooden box decorated with geometric patterns, whose opening is placed on the top. The geometric decoration, based on three colors, varies on each panel.

The box, identified as S. 8440, was empty when it was discovered. On the cover, one can see two exemplars of very showy “quadruple fences” (but without the perpendicular segments), but considering also the most external square frame, we have five fences (fig. 13). The colours used are yellow, green and white, and black for the outlines. They are still very bright, as you can see in the image, in particular on the right (for the viewer). The two geometric structures, separated by a green band, doesn’t have the same size, being the left one slightly smaller and made up by rectangles rather than square. But the colours are identical: yellow for the most external frame, then green, white, yellow and again green in the most inner square. These colours could have a magical meaning, since we know that each colour corresponds to a characteristic<sup>22</sup>. We have also noticed that the sides of the box, like others found in the same grave, are painted with chess board whose number of multicoloured cells is largely variable.

Going back to the Senet, we have noticed interesting elements just on the exemplar belonged to Kha and Merit, kept in the Egyptian Museum of Turin. First of all, it is presented as a wooden box with a drawer that can be opened with a handle (probably for putting dice and pieces and to carry it). On the upper part there is the so-called “game of the twenty cells”, arranged in a curious way: 12 (4 cells in 3 rows) are grouped together, forming something like a little chess board, on the side the drawer, and a row of 8 cells is placed centrally and vertically, until the bottom of the box. In the free spaces, outside this central row, there are hieroglyphs (also present on some of the cells), with a value probably fixed by the rules of the game. In the lower or opposite part, there is the gaming table with 30 cells (10 cells in 3 rows), so that the box had to be put upside down in order to play. The pieces were reels or cones and a set of dice was used, but the Senet was not a simple “ludus”. In fact, in the funerary context (Chapter 17 of the *Book of the Dead*), the winner would have got a “soul of a living”. A very important thing, taking into account that the opponent was invisible (the otherworldly fate). It is believed that the cells marked with specific hieroglyphs were unlucky and, therefore, to be avoided.

Seeing a Merels Board scheme, often some friends of mine remember the analogy with the plan of a square-based stepped pyramid seen from above. The classic Egyptian temple is planned on three courts (generally with the perimetric walls and two lines of columns on each side), joined together by passages leading to the most inner core, represented by the naos, or *Sancta Sanctorum* (a place forbidden to the profanes), where the simulacre of the divinity was kept. Symbolically, the classic Egyptian temple is the development on a vertical axis of a Merels Board, in which the most inner space (or the point, when present) has to be symbolically considered the ‘centre’ or core of the scheme. The famous scholar Louis Charbonneau-Lassay did the following consideration<sup>23</sup>: “*Before Christianity, the scheme of the Merel Board must have a definite symbolic meaning; it is possible that the first two lines are fences; the straight crossed lines meeting them [that’s to say the perpendicular segments] are entrances, and the most little square a high altar, or a “Sancta Sanctorum”, a place more sacred than the others. I wouldn’t be amazed if the Christians had made of it an image of the Celestial Jerusalem... ”*<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> In the esoteric doctrines, the colours are very important and are always coupled with elements like planets, metals, zodiacal signs, stones and chakras. For example, yellow is placed between orange and green, it symbolizes the sun light, the learned knowledge, the intellectual and nervous energy (it is linked to the III chakra). Green is placed between yellow and blue, it symbolizes the higher knowledge and perseverance (it is linked to the al IV chakra). Black is absence of colour and symbolizes, like white, a border: the last one of life. White contains all the colours of the electromagnetic spectrum and symbolizes the initial boundary of life (it is linked to the VII chakra). In alchemy, the colours are linked to the steps of the alchemical work. According to the different treatises, the steps are from three to five, but more commonly four: nigredo (‘putrefactio’), the black, raw matter, assimilable to lead and to man in a physical sense; albedo, marked by white (the white virgin, the ennobled mind); citrinitas, marked by yellow (the *philosophical egg*); rubedo, corresponding to red and gold or philosophers’ stone; viriditas, corresponding to green, colour of vegetation and life. Also in ancient Egypt green expressed regeneration and life.

<sup>23</sup> “La Triple enceinte dans l’emblématique chrétienne», in «Atlantis », year III, Sept- Oct 1929.

<sup>24</sup> “The Celestial Jerusalem is a square, and its length is equal to its width [...]” (Apocalypses, 21, 16). “On the east it has three doors, on the north three doors, on the south three doors, on the west three doors. The wall of the city has

A question arises: could the Merels Board have been present “in an archetypical way” in the Egyptian society of élite, as a definite symbolic support at the base of some initiatic ceremony? For example, this ceremony could be the foundation ritual of a building, or the regeneration fest of the Pharaoh (*Sed*) also known as *route around the wall*.

This ceremony, generally carried out at the end of the thirtieth year of reign of a sovereign, was surely a magical ritual through which he, from one hand, attained new strength (rejuvenation) from the cosmic powers, and from the other hand demonstrated of being still able to reign (an essential thing on the political and religious plane). The king ritually ran in the open space of the court of the temple, touching sequentially all the four cardinal points and delimiting a square; on each side there were the symbols of his reign. During the ritual, the number three stood out, because three were the turns the Pharaoh has to do around two buildings symbolizing the borders and three were the stages. At the end, the ritual procession to the main sanctuaries of the Country started.

A spur to closely examine the subject in other directions comes from the considerations of Dr. F. Berger<sup>25</sup>. He points out that the Egyptians hieroglyph for “temple” is represented by two concentric rectangles and that in the Demotic language the same word is reproduced with a subdivided rectangle or by a “rectangle on a base line”. The Greeks borrowed some of their characters from this writing and the Coptic writing developed on the base of the same Greek alphabet. In the Christianity of the origins, the rectangle (or the square) was kept as a symbol of the temple, as it was for the corresponding hieroglyph, while from the VIII century A.D. it was linked with the figure of Christ (being him a “living temple”)<sup>26</sup>.

It could have been possible that new usages penetrated in Egypt during the last phase of the Pharaonic epoch. One has to consider that in the Ptolemaic epoch (305-30 B.C.) an important role was played by the harbour of Berenice<sup>27</sup> on the routes through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Some scholars state that elephants, drawn by Indian attendants, came from Asia; the western and eastern cultures knew each other very well and usages were exchanged. And even when the Romans conquered the Egypt (30 B.C.), Indians coming from South Tamil lived in Berenice<sup>28</sup> and the relations with Alexandria, become a melting-pot of different ethnic groups and cultures, Ethiopia (Axum), India and Sri-Lanka continued. This has to be remembered when in short time we'll deal with the possible Asiatic origin of the triple concentric square, potentially come in the West through these trade routes between men and goods. In particular, it should be closely examined the fact that

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twelve foundations and twelve names on them, those of the twelve Apostles of the Lamb” (Apocalypses, 21, 13-14). “I didn't see any Temple in it, because its Temple is the Almighty Lord, and the Lamb. The city doesn't need neither sun nor moon that lights it, because the Glory of God lights it and its light is the Lamb (Apocalypses 21, 22-25).

<sup>25</sup> “The merels board as a symbol”, self-published, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Jesus himself told the Pharisees that, if the Temple, had been destroyed, he “would have rebuilt it in three days”. But He meant the temple of his own body (John, 2, 19).

<sup>27</sup> The precise placement of this city, on the Egyptian shore of the Red Sea, has remained a mystery until the first years of the XIX century of our era. A serious prospecting of the area, which is near a military zone, has begun only in 1994. This ancient harbour, built in Ptolemaic, was well connected by routes passing through land and sea. From the Nile, the roads crossed the Oriental Egyptian desert as far as the Mediterranean area and the commercial centres of the Roman world. The sea routes reached the regions of the Indian Ocean. The harbour was flourishing until about 500 A.D., later it fell into oblivion, perhaps for the changed political conditions, and was forgotten

<sup>28</sup> In this very important outpost, a team of archaeologists of the University of Delaware (USA), guided by Prof. Steven E. Sidebotham, has found evidences of the presence of goods coming from the shores of Malabar and of persons of Southern India. On “Frontline” (India's National Magazine), vol. 27, n° 8, April 10-23, 2010, in an article signed by R. Krishnakumar (link: <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2708/stories/20100423270806400.htm>) it is stated that “among the unsuspected discoveries of Berenice, there was some ancient Indian goods, comprised the greater quantity of black pepper grains ever found in the classical Mediterranean world (7,55 kg), imported from Southern India and found in the court of a temple, inside a big container made of the Nile slime; a remarkable number of Indian objects of good workmanship and of objects for cooking [...]; big quantities of tek wood, coconuts, necklaces made with precious and semi-precious stones [...]”. It is interesting the fact that it would have been found a Brahmanic Tamil graffito in which it is named Korra, a chief of the Southern India, demonstrating that the Tamil, inhabitants of Southern India (at that time comprising the greater part of the Kerala) lived in Berenice, at least in the first Roman period. Traces of Tamil Indians have been found also 300 km north of Berenice.

the settlement of the Tamil population involved the likely presence of worshippers of Buddha in the Egyptian-Roman area and this, as we'll see, is important.

Many Greek-speaking Hebrews lived in Alexandria and we know that the first five books of the Talmud, common to the Old Testament of the Christina Bible, were translated from Hebrew to Greek in the II century A.D.

Moreover, this social frame allows to understand as Hebraism and Christianity include Egyptian Greek, Gnostic, Manichaeian elements and influences of other oriental philosophies.

In the present world, the Egyptian children cannot play with the Merels Board because their father considers it a game of the Bedouins<sup>29</sup>.

### 1.3) Doubts about the Bronze Age

Always thanks to the investigations carried out by Prof. C. Wagneur in the past years, we have verified another matter regarding an exemplar of Merels Board found on a stone in Ireland. It's precisely a matter of a slab in a funerary context, dated back to the Bronze Age. Given the fact that, as we have said, one of the most important bibliographic reference is that of Murray, Prof. Wagneur inform us that, on p. 44 of his monumental work "*A history of board-games other than chess*" (1952), the scholar published a drawing and the description of this object, mentioning on his turn a literary source (R.A.S. Macalister "*Archaeology of Ireland*", 1928, p. 123) that identifies the place of finding as follows: Cr Bri Chualann near Wicklow. We have examined the 1952 essay of Murray and indeed on p. 44 the author sets apart some lines for this scheme, but there aren't images. Some decades later, in 1971, the 40<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Celtic Studies was held, in which the scholar Claude Sterckz pointed out the same stones lab on which there was "one of the most ancient game", a "draughtboard" of the Old Connaught, found in 1879 engraved on the funerary tumulus of Bray (Wicklow). It was indeed a rough sketch of a "merelle" or on the other hand our Merels Board. Unfortunately, he stated, the report of the excavation was got lost and therefore it was more difficult to establish a dating of the scheme, denoting it as undoubtedly *très ancien* ("very ancient"), without compromise ourselves in defining a precise epoch. Also Sterckz mentioned the literary source from which he had got his information: besides the same source examined by Murray, he had got from an article published in 1894 on the *Journal of the Royal Society of Ireland*, XXIV, p.58-59 by W. F. Wakeman and titled: "*On a recent discovered Pagan Sepulchral Mound in the Grounds of Old Connaught near Bray, co. Dublin*". For Prof. Wagneur, who has examined the two descriptions, both the phrase "pagan sepulchral tumulus" (when at the epoch the term "prehistori" or "Celtic"? Could be used) and the divergence of the geographical reference are anomalous. After a closet examination, he has verified that, integrating the descriptions, a site so codified can be defined: Cr Bri Chualann in Old Connaught, co. Dublin, near Bray, co. Wicklow. But he tells us that, if we tried to search for it on the *Ordinance Survey's map*, 1/126.720 scale, it would be impossible to precisely locate it... This kind of topographic map is published by the Ordinance Survey of Ireland (OSI), a survey of the Irish army, the equivalent of IGM in Italy. The scale is reported in inches (1 inch = 2,54 cm) and is in any case curious: 1 inch on the map corresponds to 126.720 inches on the ground, that's to say 316.800 cm, corresponding to 3.168 m or 3,168 km). Thanks to the advice of Prof. A. Gaspani (archaeoastronomer of the I.N.A.F. at the Astronomical Observatory in Brera, Milan), a true expert in Irish matter because he often visit Ireland for studies and researches, we have been able to define with certainty also the locality. It is Bri Chualann, a village that in the local language is "Baile" (pronunciation: "bola") souht of Dublin, without any relation with the Connaught. Finally, the locality would be Bri Chualann in the county of Wiklow, very beautiful for the landscape.

C. Wagneur must have at heart this research, since in 1985, during a stay in Ireland with his family, he thought to get in touch with the museum of Dublin in the person of one of the conservators (or

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<sup>29</sup> The Arabs that conquered the Country

archivists). He was told that no report existed for that excavation, not even the movable parts of that tomb: the tumulus remained undatable.

Since the undersigned likes to closely examine matters, and above all seems to have a certain affinity with mysteries, here is that these latter aren't late! In 2005, a stele was found during an archaeological excavation in France, in the Cave of Perroquet, documented by Ludovic Slimark, Damine Pesasse, Magala Fabre, Jean-Louis Guendon and Alette Lompré in the ambit of the *Palaeolithic Program in South Burgundy* (UMR 6636), *Maison Méditerranée des Sciences de l'Homme, Economies Sociétés et Environnements Préhistoriques* (CNRS, University of Provence)<sup>30</sup> Clearly it isn't a stele whatever, but it has a special interest for us because it is a unique case, documented by a scientific excavation, and it isn't a re-used stele: it isn't of Roman epoch, it is surely pre-Christian and a Merels Board without diagonals with proportional ratios 1:2:3 is engraved on it. The slab is composed by a triangular base, while the engraved part is a rectangle, more similar to a square (length about 31 cm, height about 30 cm and some centimetres of thickness). The contexts is worth of attention: the opening of the Cave Perroquet is placed towards the north cardinal point, the slab was found upright, oriented towards the east-west direction, the Merels Board scratched in corresponding the interior of the cave. A visitor could look outside the cave to the Merels Board, finding the slab perfectly aligned with the north direction. Obviously, one can not even vaguely suppose a ludicrous function for this exemplar, and the stele position points out that it was part of a ceremony, but could it has been used as an astronomical pointer? The researchers that have studied it are inclined to a function linked with the cardinal direction, but exclude a possible function as a sun-dial. We don't have a dating; in comparison with the Palaeolithic findings found in the same cave, the slab could pertain to the Holocene.

An enigmatic exemplar has been discovered in Italy in summer 2008 by the researches Ornello Tofani and Gianni Boezi. It is in the small town of Alatri in Latium (in province of Frosinone), known for the huge megalithic pieces of work so-called "polygonal". Just on the height where the ancient acropolis rose, on the west borders, there is a group of rocks: a Merels Board is engraved on one of these rocks and has the characteristics of being perfectly oriented towards the cardinal points. In December 2009, we went to see it, kindly accompanied by Mr. Tofani, remaining enraptured by the dream landscape offered to the eyes of the observer and ravished by the mystery proceeding from the Merels Board. The local scholar declares himself sure that the acropolis and the Merels Board are coeval and would date back to a remote epoch, around the XIV century B.C.! That the colossal work in Alatri isn't to be attributed to the Roman architects, as it was thought until a short time ago, now appear sure also to the archaeologists. But they don't go beyond the VI century B.C.; in this book we don't want to participate in the heated debate, we only limit ourselves to underscore that, with the means at our disposal, it's impossible to precisely date the Merels Board. Dominating the marvellous surrounding landscape, the rock with the Merels Board seems original and not carried there on the height in recent times. The Merels Board is well visible and is very used up, but to which epoch is it dated back?

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<sup>30</sup> La Balme du Perroquet, Trou du Père Hoquet, Grotte du Perroquet, Auxey-Duresse, Côte d'Or", ref. F. Berger (cit., 'Addenda', p. 5). Given the fact that the slab hasn't been dated with certainty, Berger ventilate the hypothesis that it could also be more recent than the Palaeolithic period and, in such case, it would be possible that the Merels Board was a copy of a gaming-table ...



**Fig. 14:** In the foreground, the Merels Board engraved on the rock in the area of the acropolis of Alatri. On the background, the naturalistic scenery

Nevertheless, we think we can express some perplexities about the fact that the exemplar is truly coeval with the block of the Acropolis. Admitting that the block is original and dates back, as some scholars think, to about the X century B.C., it is not sure that the Merels Board has been engraved in that epoch, and even much time has passed and the engraving could have been made in more recent times. Nevertheless, it is known that the blocks were covered with moss for centuries, thus who knows if the Merels Board was already there or not when the moss was taken off? But account must be taken of astronomical orientation of this specimen, further investigations, which Mr. Tofani and his collaborators are actually carrying on, are needed. The same scholar has pointed out to us the presence on the exemplar of what seem a couple of arrows in place of the classic perpendicular segments. Could they denote something meaningful from the arcaheoastronomical point of view<sup>31</sup>?

#### **The case of the megalith-calendar Monte Arcivocalotto (PA) ...**

On March 2012, we have received a report of an exemplar worthy of great attention, located in Sicily, in the municipality of San Cipirello, near the summit of Monte Arcivocalotto, in the territory of Monreale (Palermo). We due to Dr. A. Scuderi (Director of the Archaeological Groups of Italy in Sicily) such discovery, and we are grateful for this. For the purposes of this

<sup>31</sup> For further information see [http://www.archeomedia.net/images/archeomedia/ALLEGATI/Dea\\_Madre.pdf](http://www.archeomedia.net/images/archeomedia/ALLEGATI/Dea_Madre.pdf)

study, it is interesting for us that the petroglyph is placed on a calendar-monolith of the Bronze Age. The monolith is nicknamed "U Campanaro" (fig. 15) and is part of a series of sandstones structures emerging from the Numidian Flysch Oligo-Miocene, in direction north. It shows clear working marks made to obtain the orientation of the big hole (about 2 m in diameter) we see today. In ancient times, the monolith was probably surrounded by a series of small triangular blocks put in the ground, perhaps in order to delimitate the area, maybe considered sacred because linked to the sky. According to studies carried out in collaboration with Prof. Polcaro, taking account of internationally accepted standards in the field of archaeoastronomy, the monolith "U Campanaro" seems an artificial structure, made in prehistoric times to define the day of the winter solstice, with calendar and ritual purposes. In such an archaeoastronomical context, of significant importance to us is the presence of an engraving representing four concentric square with perpendicular segments (fig. 16). It has been established that "it is oriented exactly as the axis of the megalith: it is therefore linked to and oriented towards the sunrise of winter solstice. Therefore, this petroglyph allows the person near the monolith to determine with greater precision that the rays of the rising Sun at the winter solstice actually come from the direction characterizing this date; it can therefore be used as a "measuring instrument", allowing to define more precisely the exact day of the winter solstice (Paper presented at the Bologna Congress of the Italian Society of Archaeoastronomy in October 2011)<sup>32</sup>. Keep in mind that the step/overhang on which the exemplar is engraved has a surface inclined at 45°<sup>33</sup> and is placed on the northern part. The surface is affected by a phenomenology of lichens active and there you can see residual traces as grooves in a radial pattern culminating perhaps, in a double concave crown, a sort of a radially around the hole. The model thus provides an assessment is important for us. It presents the perpendicular segments and a small central hole. It isn't perfectly executed, as if it had been drawn without the use of measuring instruments, but by hand with a pin end, the central space is very large compared to the space between the square and square. The central hole does not seem deep, therefore unsuitable to contain tokens or markers of any kind, nor sticks or candles (all assumptions some scholars offer to justify the presence of holes very marked). Its presence is therefore not essential for the purposes of any recreational use.

But we need to question on several factors:

-Was really the petroglyph carved in prehistoric times, as seems to be demonstrated for the monolith / calendar?

-Was the petroglyph recorded in support to monolith, to make its function more sophisticated archaeo-astronomical?

- The horizontal position, although slightly inclined, could suggest use the petroglyph for other purpose, for example the one play, always to keep in mind?

The area where is located the artifact is the Jato Valley, known since ancient times because in the neighborhood were found pottery shards dating Eneolithic to the Bronze Age, the settlement was reused in Roman, Byzantine and medieval period. The monolith is in a position emerging, placed halfway along the Rocca Busambra - Monte Jato and belongs to the complex of Pietralunga. The area was used until the Middle Ages; the farmers cultivate the land not far from the monolith itself. How serious researchers, we must examine the various possibilities, because it was felt

<sup>32</sup> We thank Dr. A. Scuderi for having sent us the full report and the images of the monolith with the petroglyph representing the quadruple fence.

<sup>33</sup> We remind the readers that, before these reports, we have surveyed a single exemplar of quadruple fence (model no. 62), in Piedmont, near Quincinetto, on Alpe Torrione, in a deserted pasture on a sloping rock slope overlooking a ravine. Subsequently, also the quadruple fence of Coreno Ausonio (Frosinone) has been added, and probably the number will increase. See Part II referring to the census.

unequivocally that the petroglyph is prehistoric.

About the first question, we could answer that the quadruple fence could have been engraved in successive times, since the area in which it is placed has always been known, although studied only from 2010. In that case, also the added astronomical function of the “U Campanaru” would not be confirmed, but this isn’t consequent.

Why, however, the maker has chosen not to represent the usual structure of three concentric squares? And just in a position that is considered random, at least, implausible if not highly unlikely. On the base of these first considerations (since new insights will aim to solve the mystery), the hypothesis of a ludible use of this exemplar is under discussion. Personally, we believe that it isn’t dated back to the Bronze Age, but is much more recent. This does not diminish its interesting and mysterious presence on the monolith and gives us hope in some future encouraging confirmations.



**Fig. 15:** “U Campanaro” monolith



**Fig. 16:** the fourfold fence

An important feature is that during further excavations, of which we Dr. Scuderi has always kindly informed us, a brick, on which a quadruple fence is scratched, has been found. The scheme is carried out with an irregular outline and must be still properly chronologically framed and studied.

It seems us dutiful to add some considerations on the Etruscan world, without wishing to probe something that not even the specialists have still made clear. But it’s a fact that in some Etruscan room-tombs (as that of Ildebranda in Sovana (Tuscany), but also in some other ones of Tuscia, as far as we have bene able to see in person) there is a representation with concentric squares on the ceiling. They are engraved in the stone in an accurate way and not by chance (see photo n. 02 in the central file). Their position on the vault, directly linked with the sky, with a dimension higher than the earthly one, could lead to think to a metaphysic conception of the world. This conception is expressed in the three feces that philosophically become dimensional doors or subsequent steps of rebirth. Alternatively, what could it mean? The answer to the experts.



**Fig. 17:** three concentric squares on the ceiling of the “Tomb of the Lion” in Chiusi (Siena)

#### 1.4) Did the Celts know the Merels Board?

A so mysterious and complex people as the Celts need a worthy presentation and, among the numerous ones, we have chosen that of Prof. Umberto Sansoni (Dipartimento Valcamonica e Lombardia, Centro Camuno Studi Preistorici), that makes one think about how many and which cultures the Celts have been in contact with, surely exchanging each other usages and traditions: *”The Celts overbearingly enter in the European history at the beginning of the IV century B.C., when they pass the Alps, invade the Po Valley until the Adriatic Sea, restrain the Etruscans, the Venetians, the Ligurians, the Piceni, pass also the Apennines until to defeat the Romans on the Allia (387 B.C.) and sack Rome (386 B.C.). At the beginning of the III century B.C., they swarm in the Balkans, in Torace (298 B.C.), sack Delphi (297 B.C.) then an entire people, the Galatians, quarter in Asia Minor. This is the period of their apex, of their greatest continental expansion, a period in which they are the leading people and seem unstoppable: the Central Europe is Celtic, from the Carpathians to the middle course of the Danube, from Bohemica and Bavaria to Brittany, Pyrenees, North Italy, but the Celts are also in Spain (Celtiberians) and in the Britannic Isles”*<sup>34</sup>. If then we question ourselves on their origin, the mysteries thicken: *“The origin of the Celts is lost in the mist of time and it has to be searched for in the preceding civilization of Halstatt, in the pre-existing cultures of the Bronze Age and perhaps in still more ancient epochs.[...]. The top of the Celtic art, reached in the III century B.C., carries out a lucky synthesis between the Mediterranean influences and the figurative expression proper of the Nordic tradition”*<sup>35</sup>.

Therefore, it is hard to understand if and when this people could have known the “little merels” and the Merels Board schemes when we still don’t have the certainty that just the Celts engraved them on rocks or stones, even if in some cases this would seem confirmed by the scholars<sup>36</sup> And to state that it could be a native idea lacks in documental base, as for the present research. Nevertheless, one has to take in consideration different interesting elements.

One of the most employed Celtic symbols, both in the rock-art and on the amulets, is the crossed wheel or disk, often accompanied by figures with weapons. Silvana Gavaldo<sup>37</sup> (Dipartimento

<sup>34</sup> I Celti e le Alpi: l'impronta celtica nell'arte della Valcamonica”, in “I Celti”, p. 8, Quaderni della Biblioteca, n. 3, March 2001 (Comune di Pisogne, Assessorato alla Cultura), Acts of the Meeting held in Pisogne (Brescia) in February-March 2000.

<sup>35</sup> Liliana Fratti, introduction to the Meeting cited in the above note (in ‘Acts’, p. 3), mentioning the scholar P.M. Duval.

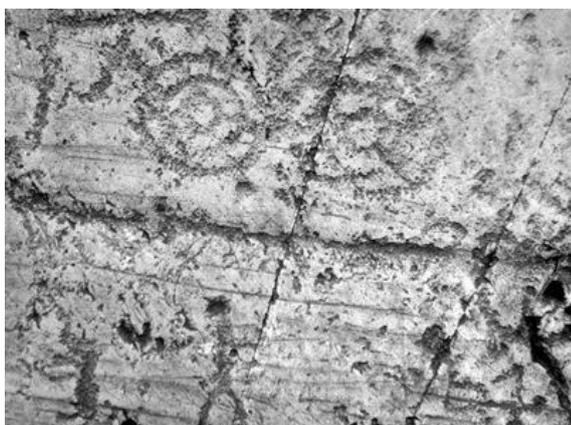
<sup>36</sup> The exemplars of Merels Board on the Austrian Alps (especialy on the Totes Gebirge) are dated back to the 500 B. C. Là Tene culture, a branch of the Celtic one

<sup>37</sup> “Divinità Celtiche sulle rocce della Valcamonica”, in “I Celti”, p. 19, Quaderni della Biblioteca, n. 3, march 2001 (Comune di Pisogne, Assessorato alla Cultura), Acts of the Congress of Pisogne (BS) , February-March 2000

Valcamonica of the Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici) writes: *”The relative presence of this sign during the whole Celtic phase of the Camunian cycle could be explained by the reference to a divinity as Taranis, whom symbol is the radiated wheel. In confirmation of this, we have a mighty figure of anthropomorph with weapon with a wheel with five rays in place of the head<sup>38</sup>: a proper identification between the anthropomorphic divinity and his symbol”*.

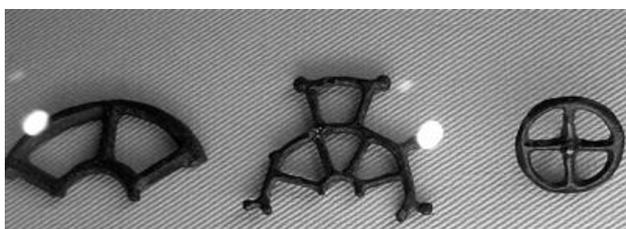


**Fig. 18:** “radius disk” (National Park of the Rock Engravings of Naquane, Capodiponte, Camonica Valley)



**Fig. 19:** Park of the Rock Engravings of Seradina-Bedolina (Brescia). There are two elements composed by three concentric radiated disks: solar wheels?

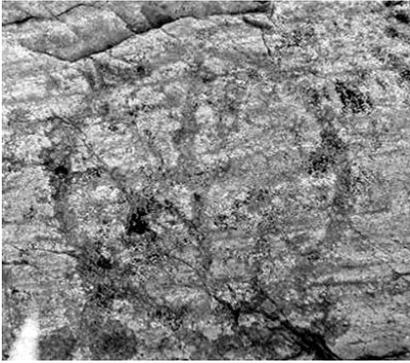
The comparison with the same elements reproduced on metal objects can allow a trustworthy dating. For example, the following bronze “solar wheels” are dated back to the IV century B.C.



**Fig. 20:** Storeroom of Parre (Bergamo, Italy), “Radiated wheels symbolizing the Sun”, end of VI century B.C. (Archaeological Museum of Bergamo)

The integral one on the extreme right is analogous to the engraved element showed in the figure below:

<sup>38</sup> The engraving is found in La Bosca locality, Paspardo (Brescia). Taranis is considered the god of thunder and the wheel. Jupiter, the Greek Zeus, has a lightning as symbol



**Fig. 21:** Crossed disk with a marked central point (rock n. 50, Park of the Rock Engravings of Naquane, Capo di Ponte, Brescia)

In Campanine di Cimbergo locality, the presence of radiated wheels is remarkable and just here - Gavaldo notes- there is a rare Latin inscription, IOVIS (Jupiter), that remember us the Latin god *Taranis* was identified with. Moreover, it seems that the Latin revalued such crossed disks, more than one thousand years old (end of the Ancient Bronze Age) in comparison with the Celtic presence in Valcamonica, attested from the V-III century B.C. This revaluation was evidently for symbolic or sacred reasons, not for ludible ones. Jan de Vries (1956) reports that the Germans employed the gaming-table for divinatory purposes, besides more profane activities as the ludible ambit; according to him, the subdivision of the gaming-table represents the cosmic system, nevertheless he doesn't give explanations about kind and modality. According to other authors, the Celtic people employed the gaming-tables for war purposes, perhaps to simulate battles. But which gaming-tables? Some Irish games dated back to before 1000 A.D. (but we don't exactly know the precise dating) are known, as the *Fidchell* or *Fitchneal* or also *Fithcheall*, with a square gaming-table whose central cell and the four ones on the corners are put in evidence with circular marks. The gaming-table is based on 7 x 7 holes (49 in total), in which probably the pieces were inserted. Written game rules nor strategies or pieces haven't been found<sup>39</sup>.



**Fig. 22:** The Irish game of capture called *Halatafi* (see note 39) is similar to some gaming-tables found also in Italy, for example in Ungiasca (Verbania, Italy), or in Venice (Italy, fig. 23). For other localities, we send to the census. The question is: was this game known in the Celtic epoch?

<sup>39</sup> A variant is based on the use of dice. A relative of this game could be the *Halatafl*, a familiar game because it is played on a crossed-shaped gaming-table composed by 5 'little merels'. It's origin seems to be another Nordic game, called *Hnefataf*; we find it more or less identical in the manuscript of Alphonso X the Wise (XIII century where it is mentioned as the capture game '*De Cercar la Liebre*', that's to say "Searching for the the hare" (it is known under different names, for examples *Fox and Geese* or *Fox and hens* of *Fox and Sheeps*). We remember that in Italy, in Ungiasca, a very little hamlet in the municipality of Cossogno (Verbania), a similar gaming-table, locally called 'The sheeps and the wolves', is still visibile. The original trace of these games with fove 'little merels' could be found in the Greek *Penthe grammai*, mentioned by Sophocles in the V century B.C., or also in the *Game of the Cities* (or *Plinthion*), mentioned by Cratinus. Anyway, the question is opened, if the 'Merels Board' was known in Celtic times, because it is a game of alignment and not of capture as those above listed. The Vikings have surely played a role in spreading the gaming-tables in Northern Europe.