

Ludus Latrunculorum Reconstructed

Ludus latrunculorum was a popular board game throughout the ancient Roman world, but unlike some ancient games it has no clear modern descendent. Despite being referenced by many Roman authors, its full ruleset is still unknown. Attempts have been made by scholars like Bell (1983) and Schädler (2001) to reconstruct it fully, and others like Austin (1934) and Richmond (1994) have proposed partial rulesets. However, their only agreed-upon rule is the capture condition - surrounding an enemy piece - and few scholars have actually tested their proposed rulesets.

For this reconstruction, I developed several different potential rulesets and tested them to see which ones would result in the kinds of strategies described in Latin literature, including *Laus Pisonis* (190-208), Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* (2.207-8, 3.357-60) and *Tristia* (2.477-80, 2.483-4), and Seneca's *De Tranquillitate Animi* (14.7), which explicitly references the win condition. One of these rulesets resulted in play that closely resembled the strategies described in the primary sources: a game where all of a player's pieces are identical, pieces can move in straight lines when unobstructed or make small leaps over adjacent enemy pieces, and the game ends when one player has lost all but one of their pieces. This reconstruction has some commonalities with each of the previous reconstructions, but differs substantially and offers a very different play experience. It provides new insight into how Romans spent their free time, and new context for the Roman poems that use the game as a symbol or metaphor.

Poster Description:

My poster would have sections describing each of the different rules I tested and how they impacted play, with images of the board showing the starting and ending positions of some trials I ran, as well as visual aids for understanding what the rules are. I already have a two-page illustrated rulebook for my final ruleset and I plan to put that on the poster as well.

References

Austin, R. 1934. "Roman Board Games. I." *Greece & Rome* 4, no. 10: 24-34.

Bell, Robert Charles. 1983. *Board and Table Games from Many Civilizations, Volumes 1-2*. Mineola: Dover Publications.

Richmond, John. 1994. "The Ludus Latruncularum and 'Laus Pisonis 190-208.'" *Museum Helveticum* 51, no. 3: 164-79.

Schädler, Ulrich. 2001. "Latrunculi: A Forgotten Roman Game of Strategy Reconstructed." *Abstract Games*, no. 7: 10-11.