

MVSE

ANNUAL of the
MUSEUM of ART and ARCHAEOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-COLUMBIA



NUMBER NINE: 1975

The Muses

on Roman Game Counters



Euterpe (No. 3 in text), enlarged.

An interesting if modest group of ancient objects is that of game counters made of ivory or bone, bearing representations of various kinds on the obverse and usually an inscription on the reverse. In a previous article¹ I have summarized the history of these counters as we know it today, mainly thanks to the studies of Rostovtzeff in 1904 and 1905.² My collection of the material has increased only slightly in the last few years, and not in essential points. These counters have Greek and Roman numerals on the reverse, from I to XV, and the inscriptions, where they exist, identify the representation on the obverse. They are all roughly the same size (see Figs. 1-11, reproduced in actual size). The representations on the obverse can be classified in a number of groups such as gods, goddesses and heroes, portraits of rulers, of athletes, philosophers and poets (for example, Menander), characters of Comedy—slaves and *hetairai*, some rendered as caricatures—theater masks, birds, quadrupeds, fishes, shellfish, zodiac signs, inanimate objects such as vases, baskets and fruit, a most interesting series of buildings representing various districts and landmarks of the city of Alexandria and the Nile Delta.

It is unfortunate that our knowledge of ancient games is not sufficient for us to determine the nature of the game for which these counters were used. Literary sources and ar-

chaeological evidence cannot be coordinated here. Those games about which we know something from ancient literature cannot be related to the counters, and the surviving gaming boards are inappropriate for the rather complicated system of pictures and numerals which they present. The numerals on the reverses do not directly correspond to the representations on the obverses, that is, we find the same representations with different numbers. Thus we may assume, I think, that there were series of fifteen counters each for every subject shown on the obverse. In this case the objective of the game may have been to assemble certain combinations of counters, for example, fifteen counters with Zeus or Athena, or all divinities with number I, and so forth. A comparable game that comes to mind is the Chinese mahjong, where we also have numbered sets of representations (nine and four). These, according to the skill of the player, can be assembled in a variety of ways, which count more or less in reckoning the winnings.

A set of fifteen counters was found in a child's tomb in Kerch (Crimea) and published by Rostovtzeff in 1904.³ Unfortunately it does not shed much light on these matters, apart from the fact that it shows that fifteen pieces made one set. Among these counters from Kerch we have nine deities, one ruler, one Alexandrian "district," two representations of athletic com-



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3



4



5



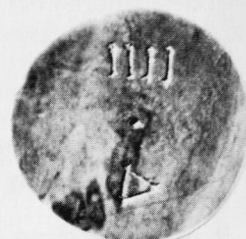
6



7



8





9



10



11

petitions and two male portraits. The collection of a series of I-XV with a variety of obverses might have been the easiest achievement in this game.

The only almost complete series from I-XV that I have been able to assemble is one that may have been used to count up the winnings. The obverses show hands denoting the numerals on the reverses in the position known also from medieval manuscripts illustrating the finger calculus.⁴

THE MUSEUM OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY of the University of Missouri possesses a fine game counter of bone featuring the Muse Euterpe.⁵ It belongs to a group within the category of divinities and heroes; this certainly must have originally contained all the nine Muses. At present only four Muses identified by inscriptions are known to me, to which may be added some uninscribed ones showing similar types and one with two Muses but inscribed "Nine Muses."

1. Clio (Fig. 1). Paris, Cabinet des Médailles, A19845-6/212. Obverse: draped female bust facing right. No attribute. Reverse: I/KAEIΩ/A.

2. Clio (Fig. 2). Paris, Cabinet des Médailles, A19847-8/211. Piece broken off. Obverse: draped female bust facing right, almost identical to No. 1. Reverse: numerals I/K. (No name). The bust on the obverse is so similar to No. 1 that I suggest it is also a rendering of Clio.

3. Euterpe (Fig. 3). Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Acc. No. 65. 148. Obverse: torso-length female bust facing left. Reverse: II/EYTEPIH/B. The figure is draped in a mantle which has slipped off the shoulders. Euterpe's hair is brushed back in fairly straight locks bound with a narrow fillet and gathered into a small knot at the nape of her neck. A corkscrew lock hangs down to her shoulder. She holds a double flute (*tibiae*) in her left hand.

4. Euterpe (Fig. 4). Paris, Cabinet des Médailles, A19849-50/196. Obverse: torso-length female bust facing right. Reverse: II/EYTEPIH/B. Euterpe wears a mantle that

covers only her left shoulder. Her hair is arranged like that of No. 3, but there is no fillet. She holds the double flute in her left hand, rather like a scepter.

5. Melpomene (Fig. 5). Paris, Cabinet des Médailles, A19947-48/ Exp. LXXXI. Obverse: torso-length female bust facing right. Reverse: III/ΜΕΛΠΟΜΕΝΗ/Δ. She wears a short-sleeved chiton and a mantle fastened on her right shoulder by a circular clasp. Melpomene's hair style is similar to that of Euterpe, but the long corkscrew lock is lacking. She is playing the lyre.

6. Melpomene (Fig. 6). Paris, Cabinet des Médailles, A19935-36/ Exp. LXXXI 53 no. Obverse: torso-length female bust facing right. Reverse: IIII/ΜΕΛΠΟΜΕΝΗ/Δ. She wears a sleeved chiton and a himation: the arrangement of the latter is not quite clear. Melpomene's hair style is similar to that of the other Muses, with long locks falling onto the shoulder. A tragic mask faces her.

7. Erato (Fig. 7). London, British Museum. Acc. No. 59/3-1/46. Photo Warburg Institute, London (Parker-Ross). Obverse: torso-length female bust facing right. Reverse: VI/ΕΡΑΤΩ/Ε. Erato wears a chiton buttoned at the sleeves. Her coiffure is like that of the other Muses, including the locks falling onto the shoulder. In front of her is an object that looks like a folded scroll. Adrien Blanchet, *Rev. arch.* 13 (1889) 238, no. 11. F. Wieseler, *Commentatio de tesseris eburneis osseisque theatralibus*, Programm Universitaet Goettingen 1866-1867, I, 8. Georg Kaibel (ed.), *Inscriptiones Graecae* XIV, 2414, 22. Christian Huelsen, *Roemische Mitteilungen* 11 (1896) 242, no. 37.

8. Erato ? (Fig. 8). Paris, Cabinet des Médailles, Exp. LXXXI. Obverse: torso-length female bust facing right. Reverse: IIII/Δ. The figure is draped like No. 7. Her hair style is similar, but there is no "roll" framing the forehead and the bun at the back is larger and sits higher. The object in front of her seems to be a kind of *scrinium* (book-box); at any rate it is box-like. It seems fairly certain that the figure is supposed to represent one of the Muses, but whether she really is Erato cannot be ascertained.

9. Erato ? (Fig. 9). Munich, Collection

Overbeck. Photo of plaster cast provided by the owner. Obverse: torso-length female bust facing right. Reverse: VII/Z. The woman's hair style is almost identical to that of No. 7 but her dress is different: she wears an ample mantle over her chiton. Her right hand emerges from the folds of the mantle, her index and middle fingers pointing to the object in front of her which, like that on No. 7, looks like a folded scroll. It is mainly on account of the similarity to Erato No. 7 that I suggest this is also the same Muse.

10. Erato ? (Fig. 10). Collection Max Crépy, Marcq-en-Baroeuil (Nord), near Lille. Photos Studio Maiaisy, Lille. Obverse: torso-length female bust facing left. Reverse: VII/ΕΡΩΣ/Η. The figure is draped in a chiton and perhaps a himation, part of which may be seen on the right shoulder. The lady wears her hair in two rows of curls framing the cheek, behind these a flat fillet, and on the top and back of the head the hair is brushed in fairly straight strands. A narrow fillet encircles the curl above the forehead. Her right hand is raised, with the index finger laid on the lower lip in a gesture of thoughtfulness such as we also see in the figure of Polyhymnia in the fresco from Herculaneum.⁶ The inscription "Eros" is certainly an error, for there is no doubt that the bust is that of a woman. There is, of course, no proof for my suggestion that Eros is a mistake for Erato.

11. The Nine Muses (Figs. 11, 14). London, British Museum. Photos Warburg Institute, London (Parker-Ross). Obverse: three-quarter figures of two women. Reverse: VI/ΜΟΥΣΑΙ/Θ/Δ. Both are draped in sleeveless chitons, that of the right-hand one belted below the breast, and himatia. The himation of the Muse at the left leaves the right breast uncovered, while that of the Muse at the right is draped only around the hips. The Muse at the left stands with her right arm akimbo and her left hanging awkwardly by her side, partly merging with the right arm of her companion. Her head is seen in profile. Her hair is parted in the center and brushed in gentle waves to the sides and the back, where it seems to be gathered in a loose knot. The other Muse is seated, her chest seen *en face*, the lower part of her body being turned slightly to her right and her head slightly to her



12. The denarii of Q. Pomponius Musa (62 B.C.), showing head of Apollo on the obverses, the Nine Muses on the reverses.



13. Apollo Musagetes on bone counters. Left: a) Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum. Right: b) Collection Blanchet.

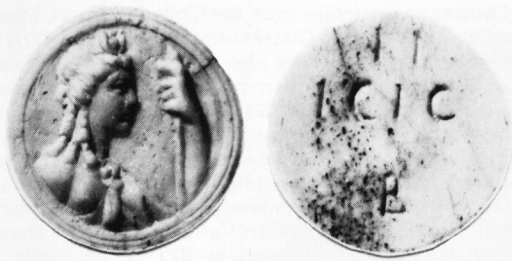
left. Her hair style is the same as her companion's. She holds in her left arm a stringed instrument, partly damaged, which may be a *kithara*. This could identify her as Erato. The Muse at the left has no attribute. She might be Calliope, who is frequently rendered without an attribute, but in the absence of identifying inscriptions there can be no certainty. Blanchet, *Rev. arch.* 13 (1889) 369, no. 22. Wieseler, *op. cit.*, 7-8. John O. Westwood, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Fictile Ivories in the South Kensington Museum* (London 1876) 2. Kaibel, *op. cit.*, 2414, 41. Huelsen, *Roem. Mitt.* 11 (1896) 249, no. 69. *Guide to the Exhibition Illustrating Greek and Roman Life*, British Museum (London 1908) 197, fig. 206; 3rd edition (London 1929) 203, fig. 223.



14. The Nine Muses (No. 11) enlarged to show details.

THERE DOES NOT SEEM to have been a canonical set of the Nine Muses with firmly defined functions and set attributes.⁷ Our game counters with inscribed names may illustrate this. Both specimens of Euterpe have as an attribute the double flute, which belongs to her in the standard versions of the series of Nine Muses. Melpomene, however, appears in two ways, once confronting a tragic mask (No. 6), which is her attribute in the standard series; on the other specimen (No. 5) she has a lyre, which is quite unusual. Melpomene appears with a number of attributes such as the double flute, a harp or a branch.⁸ Erato (No. 7) seems to have as her attribute a scroll, which does not normally belong to her but to Clio, who in our series (No. 1) has no attribute at all.

Among the fairly numerous series of all the Muses that have come down to us from Hellenistic to late Roman times there is one which seems to me of particular importance in the present context, since it also appears on small objects, that is, on the *denarii* of Q. Pomponius Musa (known only from these coins), minted in 62 B.C., fifty or sixty years before our counters were made.⁹ Since these coins are better known to numismatists than to art historians, the set is illustrated here with one specimen for each Muse (Fig. 12). The head of Apollo is on each obverse, and on the reverses are all the Muses, rendered as standing figures. The identification can be made only by comparison with other cycles of the Muses. The drapery of the Missouri Euterpe and the seated Muse of counter No. 11 may be compared with the figure of Terpsichore with the *kithara* on the coins (Fig. 12, g), and the drapery of the standing Muse of No. 11 is not unlike that of Melpomene on the coins (Fig. 12, c).



15. Counter showing the bust of Isis.

The Pomponius Musa series has as a tenth type Hercules Musarum (Fig. 12, k). With regard to the game counters, we have to assume that originally all the nine Muses were represented. Froehner has suggested that the nine Muses were supplemented by six poets to make up a set of fifteen.¹⁰ This seems unlikely, since the poets belong to the groups of human celebrities. Among the counters with deities we have two examples of Apollo Musagetes (Fig. 13) which might well belong to the series of the Muses,¹¹ as Hercules Musarum belongs to the set of the Pomponius Musa denarii. Athena frequently appears with Apollo on sarcophagi showing the Muses.¹² But perhaps we do not have to look for supplements to our series if we are right in assuming that each type existed with numbers ranging from I to XV.

With regard to artistic quality, most of our game counters are rather modest products. But there are exceptions, and to these belongs the Euterpe in Missouri. A comparison with the Paris Euterpe in particular (Fig. 4) makes this quite clear. The pose and the rendering of the head are very graceful and the carving of the drapery shows some plasticity. The rendering of the arms is a little awkward, as in nearly all the other specimens. Among the game counters known to me there are especially two which are stylistically comparable to the Missouri Euterpe—the two Muses on the counter in London (No. 11, Fig. 14) and a counter in Paris, Cabinet des Médailles, with a bust of Isis (Fig. 15).¹³ All three pieces show a similar rendering of the head and a similar plastic treatment of the body and the drapery. Whereas the London Muses share with Euterpe the awkward treatment of the arms, the Paris Isis is an exception. She holds a scepter in her left

hand in a pose very like that of Olympias on the contorniates and elsewhere, a gesture based on Hellenistic models. Still another bone carving, which is probably not a game counter although it has the same shape, may be compared here. It is a small disk with a rather thick rim in the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria (Fig. 16).¹⁴ Represented in fairly high relief is a woman seated on rocks, playing the lyre or kithara. She wears a sleeveless chiton and a himation, one end of which is laid across her lap. Her long hair floats in the wind. Her pose shows the Hellenistic *contraposto*, with her head turned slightly to her right, the upper part of her body to her left, and the lower part turned again a little to her right. The plastic treatment of the body and the drapery is comparable to the Euterpe, the two London Muses and the Paris Isis. The head is rather rubbed, but seems to have been like the four heads mentioned. It is fairly certain that the woman on the Alexandria disk is meant to be Sappho on the Leucadian rock, just before her suicide.

As to the date of the counters, Rostovtzeff has shown conclusively, in my opinion, that the game for which they were used was invented in Alexandria in the time of Julius Caesar and Augustus,¹⁵ and since the last emperor appearing on some of the obverses is Nero, the period of production of these counters may be defined as between Julius Caesar and the end



16. Bone disk probably representing Sappho at Lesbos, about to leap into the sea.

of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.¹⁶ The Missouri Euterpe, the London Muses, the Paris Isis and the Alexandria Sappho are still so firmly rooted in the Hellenistic tradition that we may assume that they belong to the earliest phase of the game. The main importance of these little objects is, however, not in the field of art history but in that of cultural history. They provide additional evidence of the role of Hellenistic Alexandria in the shaping of the cultural background of Imperial Rome.

ELISABETH ALFÖLDI
University of Toronto

¹ The present article is No. II of "Studies in Roman Game Counters." I began to study these counters some years ago with the support of a grant from Canada Council. My first study was published under the title "The Finger Calculus in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages," in *Fruehmittelalterliche Studien* 5 (1971) 1-9, pls. 1-8. A third study is to be published in a *Beiheft zu Antike Kunst* in honor of Professor Hans Jucker (probably in 1976): "Ruler Portraits on Roman Game Counters from Alexandria." A further study, "Alexandriaca," will appear in *Chiron* 6 (1976). The collection of the material is now almost complete, and the corpus of Alexandrian game counters will eventually be published by the German Archaeological Institute. The photographs for the present article have been supplied by the museums, except when stated otherwise.

² Michael Rostovtzeff, "Tessères anciennes en os du sud de la Russie," *Bulletin de la Commission Impériale Archéologique* 10 (1904) 109-124, pls. 3, 4 (in Russian); I owe a German translation of the article to M. and Th. Kreifelts and M. Kovalenko. *Idem.*, "Interprétation des tessères en os," *Revue archéologique* 5 (1905) 110-124.

³ See note 2 above.

⁴ *Fruehmittelalterliche Studien* 5 (1971) 1-9.

⁵ Acc. No. 65.148. Chorn Memorial Fund. Diameter 3.6 cm., maximum thickness, 4 mm. Rim slightly damaged. Upper part, above the eye, broken and mended.

⁶ Max Wegner, *Die Musensarkophagē (Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs Vol. 5, 3 [Berlin 1966])* Beilage 1. Cf. also the thoughtful pose of Polyhymnia on statues and on sarcophagi, *ibid.*, 109 f., Beilage 4-5.

⁷ On cycles of the Muses in general see most conveniently Wegner, *op. cit.*, 93 ff., and Klaus Parlasca, *Die römischen Mosaiken Deutschlands (Römisch-germanische Forschungen 23 [Berlin 1959])* 141 ff.

⁸ See Wegner, *op. cit.* The Herculeanum paintings (Wegner, *ibid.*, 96 ff., Beilagen 1-2) show clearly that at the time our counters were designed no uniformity existed in the iconography of the Muses.

⁹ In general H. A. Grueber, *Coins of the Roman Republic in the British Museum* 1 (London 1910) nos. 3602-3632; E. A. Sydenham, *The Coinage of the Roman Republic* (London 1952) nos. 810-823. Cf. a set of nine types

of Muses and Hercules from the Collection Voirol, Muenzen und Medaillen 38 (Basel December 1968) nos. 182-191. Wegner, *op. cit.*, 94 ff. See also Andreas Alföldi, "Studien zur Zeitfolge der römischen Republik," *Schweizerische numismatische Rundschau* 36 (1954) 11 ff.; *idem.*, "Redeunt Saturnia Regna 5," *Chiron* 5 (1975), where the date 62 B.C. is established. The identifications are not certain, as Wegner, *loc. cit.*, has pointed out, but are given in the following list in the conventional manner: a) Clio, Grueber 3610-3611, Sydenham 813. Vatican 3074; b) Euterpe, Grueber 3613-3614, Sydenham 815. L. de Nicola; c) Melpomene, Grueber 3615-3616, Sydenham 816. Private Collection; d) Erato, Grueber 3612, Sydenham 814. Vatican 3073; e) Calliope, Grueber 3606-3609, Sydenham 811-812. L. de Nicola 016; f) Polyhymnia, Grueber 3617-3618, Sydenham 817-818. Vatican 3079; g) Terpsichore (with kithara), Grueber 3619-3623, esp. 3622 (pl. 45, 21), Sydenham 819-820, esp. 819 (pl. 23). L. de Nicola 023; h) Terpsichore (with lyre), Grueber 3619-3623, esp. 3619 (pl. 45, 20), Sydenham 819-820, esp. 819 a (pl. 23). Vatican 3077; i) Thalia, Grueber 3624-3627, Sydenham 821-822. Bern; j) Urania, Grueber 3628-3632, Sydenham 823. L. de Nicola; k) Hercules Musarum, Grueber 3602-3605, Sydenham 810. Bern. The obverses of a-j show heads with laurel wreaths facing right. The coiffure is female: hair brushed in gentle waves to the sides and back and gathered in a loose knot at the nape of the neck, not unlike that of our Muses but also known for Apollo. The attributes on the obverses behind the heads do not correspond in all cases to the attributes carried by the Muses on the reverses. The obverse of k has a different kind of head, with long corkscrew locks and encircled by a diadem tied above the forehead in a kind of Hercules knot. This is certainly also Apollo.

¹⁰ Wilhelm Froehner, *Collection August Dutuit* (Paris 1901) 151.

¹¹ a) Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Inv. X 440; see A. Alföldi, *Die Kontorniaten* (Budapest 1943) pl. 60, 13. Obverse: head of Apollo with laurel wreath facing left; in front a lyre or kithara. Reverse: XIII/ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝ/ΙΓ. b) Collection Blanchet, acquired at Rennes. Blanchet, *Rev. arch.* 13 (1889) 236, no. 5; Huelsen, *Roem. Mitt.* 11 (1896) 240, no. 11. Obverse: bust of Apollo with wreath and lyre facing right; reverse: X/ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝ/Ι. The piece is here reproduced from an enlarged drawing in Blanchet's article, as I have been unable to locate it.

¹² See e.g., Wegner, *op. cit.*, 112 ff.

¹³ Paris, Cabinet des Médailles, Exp. LXXXI. Obverse: bust of Isis facing right, holding a scepter in her left hand. Reverse: II/ΙΣΙΣ/Β.

¹⁴ Inv. No. 10817. Diameter 3.5 cm. The photograph was kindly supplied by M. Riad. Dr. G. Grimm kindly checked the inventory in Alexandria for me (the piece itself being at the time inaccessible) and found no notes about the reverse. There is no precise provenience ("achat").

¹⁵ See above, note 2.

¹⁶ This date is further supported by the fact that a number of counters were found in Pompeii and Herculeanum (most of them now in the Museo Nazionale in Naples) and that one piece comes from Vindonissa, from a context that cannot be later than Tiberius.