

Five Lines

A Greek and Roman game of chance

History

Five Lines was played by both the Ancient Greeks and Romans, but the boards they used were slightly different. Archaeological finds show that the Romans used a board with 10 rectangles and sometimes a “double” board of 22 rectangles.

Evidence

- The game is mentioned by Pollux in his *Onomasticon*.
- Alkaïos makes the earliest written reference to the game in 600 BCE.
- Game boards have been found in graves dating back to the 7th century BCE.

Reconstruction

Rules vary according to interpretation of available evidence. The Roman version of the game often included double the number of ‘lines’. The rules in this version have been simplified for use by children.

Follow-on activities

1. Make a double ‘Roman’ version of the game with twice the number of rectangles. Can you work out how to play it? This could involve geometry, measurement, scaling up/scaling down.
2. Most of the instructions for ancient games come from letters and poems written by ancient authors. Write a letter to a friend telling them how and where you played Five Lines.