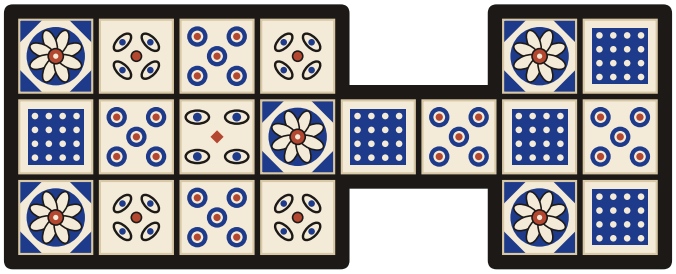
The Royal Game of Ur

Name _____

Read about one of the oldest board games in the world.



The board is drawn from the one found at Ur, now in the British Museum.

About 4,600 years ago, in the city of Ur in Mesopotamia (today's Iraq), people played a race game on a board of 20 squares. In the 1920s the archaeologist Leonard Woolley dug up the city's royal tombs and found several of these boards buried with the dead. The best one is now in the British Museum in London.

The board is a wooden box covered with tiny pieces of shell, red limestone and blue lapis lazuli, set in black bitumen, a kind of natural tar. Lapis lazuli does not come from Mesopotamia. Traders carried it more than 1,200 miles from the mountains of Afghanistan, so a board like this was a treasure.

It was not only a game for kings. People across the ancient world played it for about 3,000 years, from Egypt to India. Guards at an Assyrian palace scratched a board into the stone of a giant statue at the gate, so they could play while they waited. In one city in southern India, families still played a version of it in the 1900s.

For a long time nobody knew the rules. Then Irving Finkel, an expert at the British Museum, read a clay tablet written in cuneiform by a Babylonian scribe in 177 BC. It gives clues about how the game was played, and Finkel used them to work out the rules most people use today.

Questions

1. Where is Ur? What is that land called today?

2. Name the three materials set into the black bitumen to make the pattern.

3. Why was lapis lazuli special for the people of Ur?

4. How do we know the game was played by ordinary people, not only kings? Give one clue from the reading.