

Curator's Choice

Native American Gaming Stones

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Games have always been an integral part of human culture. Throughout history, games have been used to teach new skills, provide an escape from the rigors and stress of daily life, as well as to solidify social and political bonds within a particular group, clan, or tribe.

Native American cultures have a long tradition of gaming. Early European accounts of contact with Native Americans describe a variety of games. Many required physical skill and dexterity, such as ball games ~ e.g. Lacrosse ~ or snow-snake, a spear throwing game played on the ice or snow (George 2001: 1). Others were games of chance, such as the “moccasin game”, similar to the ball and cup game still popular today, or “dice” games played with an assortment of stones or seeds marked with notches or pictures (Hudson 1976: 426).

One of the most popular games among Native American tribes was called “chunkey” (or, alternatively, “chunkee or “t-chung-kee”), which was played with polished, disc-shaped stones (Figure 1). Chunkey stones have convex edges and concave sides and were occasionally perforated in the center. Played by men on courts of smooth, hard packed dirt, chunkey was a two player version of a hoop and stick game (Figure 2). It was played by rolling the chunkey stones across the ground and throwing or sliding sticks at them in an attempt to place the spear as close to where the stone stops as possible (Hudson 1976: 423).



Figure 2: Painting *Tchung-kee, a Mandan Game Played with a Ring and Pole* by George Catlin, 1832 (Smithsonian American Art Museum).

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Figure 1: Gaming or “chunkey” stones from sites in Frederick and Montgomery Counties in Maryland.

For the players, chunkey was a game of skill. However, for the spectators, it was a game of chance, as they frequently bet on the game, with some wagering everything they owned on the outcome. They were even known to bet their wives, children or their own freedom. Some losers were even known to commit suicide (Figure 3).

Chunkey is believed to have originated around 600 A.D. in the ancient Native American city of Cahokia, in the area of now modern day St. Louis, Missouri (Pauketat 2009: 54). In Cahokia, chunkey was played in large arenas and brought together people from the surrounding region. Even after the city of Cahokia fell in c. 1500 A.D., variations were played throughout North America. Some Native American tribes continued playing the chunkey game long after European contact, as witnessed by the artist George Catlin in 1832 (Figure 2).

“Their favorite game of chunke is a plain proof of the evil consequences of a violent passion for gaming upon all kinds, classes, and orders of men; at this they play from morning to night, with an unwearied application, and they bet high: here you may see (him) come and bring all his skins, stake them and lose them; next his pipe, his beads, trinkets and ornaments; at last his blanket, and other garment, and even all their arms, and, after all it is not uncommon for them to go home borrow a gun and shoot themselves...”

Figure 3: Quote from 18th century Dutch navigator, surveyor, and naturalist Captain Bernard Romans. Published in *Games of the North American Indians* by Stewart Culin, 1907.



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