

CRAFTY ROMANS

BONE DIE ACTIVITY

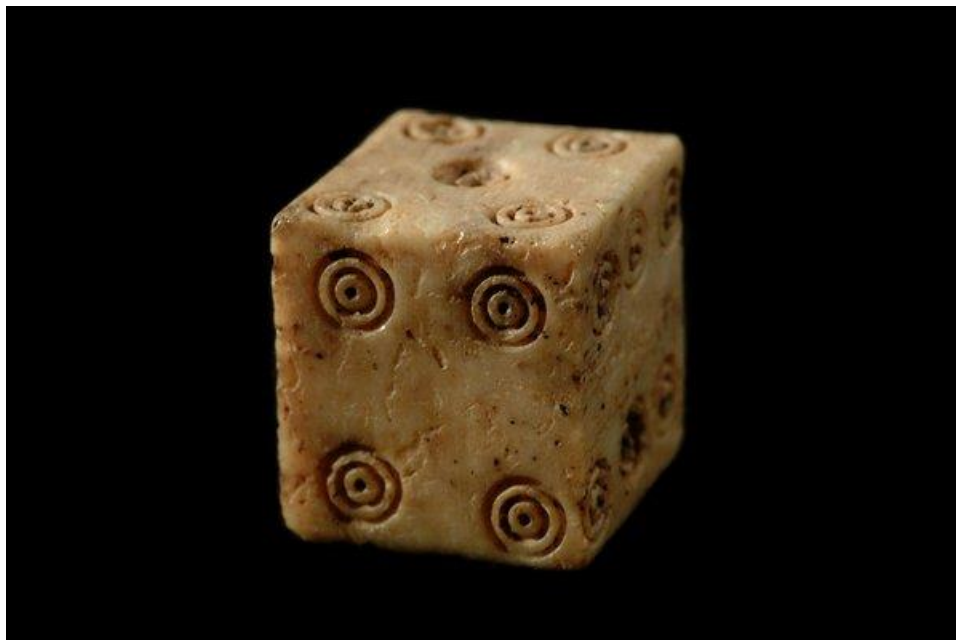


Image: Bone Die

This die is made from deer antler. It is called a Tessera in Latin and has 6 sides. A special drill was used to produce the dots, and the grooves were probably originally filled with black wax to make them stand out more. Like modern dice, the numbers on opposing faces add up to seven. (In case it's been a while since you played a game with dice, the opposite sides of our dice are one and six, three and four, and two and five).

Two or more dice could be used in a game on their own, or they could be used on board games (such as games like backgammon, tic-tac-toe, and checkers). They were often thrown in a cup or a specially made 'dice tower' – with steps on the inside – to stop people cheating. However, not all the dice we find are absolutely square, so a dice tower would not be of much use – however, this one looks pretty square and well-made.

The Romans played with another die, called a Talus in Latin, and it had 4 sides. This die was made from the talus bone located in a hoofed animals' ankle. The Romans often used the talus from a sheep. It was used in a game called knuckle Bones, similar to the game of Jacks, or in gambling, chance or telling the future games. Each side of the die had a numerical value like a 6-sided die, but was determined by the shape of the side facing up when rolled or cross hatching, rather than by dots indicating the value.

Playing dice games was particularly common at Saturnalia, the ancient Roman festival of Saturn starting 17th December, a period of merrymaking and the precursor of Christmas, where slaves sometimes even played with their masters (unlike the rest of the year).

ACTIVITIES

TAKE A GOOD LOOK AT THIS DIE

What do you see, notice, and wonder about it? Was it part of a pair? Was it used for gambling or board games? Did it belong to a soldier, centurion, or officer? Do you think it is heavy or light as it's made from bone? Does it feel the same as the dice we use today? How does the markings on this die compare to dice today?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

Think about all the games today that use dice. How many can you list?

Do any of these games have dice that do not have 6 sides?

What might a Talus (4-sided) die look like?

Make a sketch and then a model of a 4-sided die. You can use card, paper, clay, foil, salt dough or any other materials you have that might work. You can make a pair if you like, giant dice or small dice, it's up to you!

Once you have made your Talus click on [this link](#) to see what a Talus looked like and compare it to your creation.

LEARNING EXTENSION

Read about these weird Roman Festivals. Are they similar to festivals we have today? Why not try to make up weird festivals of your own for each month of the year. Mix your festivals up with the Roman ones and share them with your friends, classmates, and family. See if they can figure out which ones are Roman and which ones you made up!

Really Weird Roman Festivals

- Saturnalia

Held in late December and involves feasting and present giving. Most notably, though, it was the night when masters and slaves exchanged places.

- Lupercalia

A festival in February that involves young men running through the streets, striking people with goat pants.

- Veneralia

On April 1 women (aristocrats and plebs mingling together) were allowed to enter the men's baths, wearing myrtle wreaths in honour of Venus Verticordia. They would take a statue of Fortuna Virilis (fortune of men) in with them, removing her jewellery (yep, statues wore jewellery) to wash her.

- Parilia

A rural festival, this one involves shepherds and sheep jumping over bonfires.

- Fornacalia

This festival is about the baking of the corn and using ovens.

- Parentalia

This is a festival of the dead held in February in honour of dead relatives. It is a week of sacrifices (flower garlands, wheat, salt, wine-soaked bread, violets) to the manes or shades of the dead. At the end of the week, on the Feralia, the paterfamilias (senior male of the family) exorcises the ghosts, and the following day on the Caristia, everyone has a nice lunch and says nice things about their dead relatives who are now gone again until next year.

- Floralia

A week-long festival in April-May revolving around flowers, flowers and more flowers. Also, colourful clothes, milk and honey. It was dedicated to the spring goddess Flora. The Romans also held the Ludi Florales or Games of the Flowers, which actually involved lots of theatre and performing arts as well as a circus.