

INFORMATION AND RULES

TALI AND TESSERAE

ABOUT

Tali (*astragaloī* in Greek) were the six-sided “knucklebones”—ankle bones—of sheep or goats. Romans used them as dice and also made artificial versions out of many materials. Although they are really 6-sided, knucklebones are considered 4-sided because their short, rounded ends did not count (a die could not stand on them).

Since each side of a knucklebone has a different shape, it doesn’t need to be numbered to be identifiable, but the four usable sides were identified as I, III, IV, and VI (missing II and V, the rounded ends). When the Romans used dice to mimic tali, they left blanks where II and V would have been. If you threw an unnumbered side, it counted as zero, or you could agree to throw again. Both kinds of tali (knucklebones and 4-sided dice) were thrown from the hand or a special box (*fritillus*). The number that was counted was face down, not face up! (You don’t have to follow that rule.)



Left: Astragalos, 1st century BC–1st century AD, Roman. Glass.
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Gift of Nicolas Koutoulakis.
Right: Roman Egyptian ivory dice from Oxyrhynchus, and container,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Tesserae are 6-sided dice, like ours, often used to move the pieces on a game board. Used alone they were generally for gambling, to provide a win with the highest number.

We do not know the rules for many knucklebone and dice games, although we can guess, and making up your own rules is not a problem. The Romans probably did that too. These are some games with rules we can reasonably guess.

WHAT YOU NEED

- 2 or more players
- Paper and pencil to record scores
- Tali or six-sided tesserae (a.k.a. regular dice)

GAMES OF SKILL AND DEXTERITY

1. Catch tali or tesserae in the air

Goal: Catch the most tali on the back of the hand over 5 or 10 turns

- Decide on a length of time or a number of throws per turn
- Hold five tali in one hand and toss them up in the air
- Turn your hand over and try to land all of them on the back of the throwing hand (also try landing them on the other hand—this is very difficult!)
- Leave the fallen tali where they are
- Throw the tali up again from the back of your hand and catch them in your palm.
- Keep going until you fail to catch any tali, fumble badly, or reach the limit of your turn, in which case your turn ends; start over at the next turn

TALI AND TESSERAE

2. Pick up tali or tesserae

Goal: First player to pick up 40 tali while another one is in the air wins

- This game, like Jacks, is often played on the floor
- Scatter 5 or 10 tali within a designated space, usually a circle
- Toss one in the air; sweep up as many other tali as you can and then catch the one in the air before it can fall to the ground; repeat
- When you have picked up all tali with no errors, or if you fumble, the next player has a turn
- If players are skilled enough to sweep up many knucklebones at once, change the rules to require that just 3 must be picked up in one throw, and raise the number of points to win

GAMES OF CHANCE

1. Throw tali with the emperor

Goal: The first player to throw a Venus takes the pot

Suetonius reports that the emperor Augustus loved betting on throws of dice with his guests and friends! (*Divus Augustus* 71)

- Throw 4 tali (knucklebones and or 4-sided dice); of 35 possible named throws, look for these:
 - Venus – the best throw: all the numbers were different: 1, 3, 4, 6
 - Senio (the Six) – 6 and any other combination of numbers: 6, #, #, #
 - Vulture – all numbers are the same (except 1): 3, 3, 3, 3 etc.
 - Canis (the Dog) – the worst: 1, 1, 1, 1
- Players alternate throwing and put pennies or candies into the pot for each Canis (3 pennies), Vulture (2 Pennies), or Senio (1 penny)

2. Honor Bacchus the wine god with tali

Goal: The first guest to achieve the “Venus throw” is designated the arbiter

Romans chose their arbiter *bibendi*, master of drinking, by throwing tali until someone won the Venus throw (all four possible numbers came up: 1, 3, 4, 6). The arbiter chose the ratio of wine to water in the wine mixing bowl.

- Everyone throws the tali, invoking Venus as goddess of (not what you think): seafaring, military success, civic harmony, and yes, love and passion
- Your victorious arbiter can decide on anything you like. Perhaps the music. A song everyone must sing. Pizza toppings...



Statuette of a Roman girl playing tali, Altes Museum, Berlin.

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