

We asked our resident gaming expert Steven Townshend, OI publications, to put together a list of his 10 favorite contemporary ancient Middle East themed board games. Many of these games can be ordered online and played at home, in many cases, you can download the app and play on your phone.

#1 **Tigris and Euphrates**, by Reiner Knizia

Core mechanic: abstract strategy

[The iOS app is 99 cents.](#)



Of the (hundreds of?) games Reiner Knizia has designed, Tigris and Euphrates is widely considered his masterpiece. It's an abstract strategy game where you're trying to connect tiles of various colors, which represent temples, settlements, markets, and farms (red, black, green, and blue respectively) and score points for them. Trick is, your end game score is whatever color you have the LEAST amount of points in, so you must keep them all balanced. When your tiles touch another player's there's a big shakeup (a war) and you must compare who has the most of each color in the currently adjoined regions. The loser loses all their tiles of that color. The game is chess-like in strategy. You can see that in the current (out of stock) edition, the tiles and pieces have been fashioned to resemble ancient Mesopotamian art.



#2 **Trade on the Tigris**, by Geoff Engelstein and Ryan Sturm

Core mechanic: Trading, wheeling, and dealing

This is a trading game produced by Tasty Minstrel Games. There's no product page for it anymore, so it's on its way out, but lots of places still have it. Players take the role of traders from various cities along the Tigris and trade like mad in a frenetic marketplace exchange that lasts five minutes each round. As you can see from the picture below, each player gets a board representing Mesopotamian cities you don't often see in board games. The game isn't very well

known, but it's very much on theme for the OI and still widely available.

#3 7 Wonders, by Antoine Bauza

Core mechanic: card drafting

[The iOS app is \\$5](#)



One of the most popular tabletop games of our time, it plays fast, and plays up to seven players. Each player has a hand of seven cards, plays one, and passes the rest to the next player. So it's a card drafting game with an ancient world theme. The seven wonders in the game are the seven wonders of the ancient world. It's very clever, very fast, and a good family game.

#4 Mare Nostrum: Empires, by Serge Laget

Core mechanic: "characters on a map"

Mare Nostrum: Empires is one of my favorite games. The big, Roman-style map divides the ancient world into territories as viewed by the Romans. As you can see in the picture, there's Thracia, Macedonia, Dalmatia, etc. This is just part of a map that goes from Babylonia to Carthage.



Players take on the roles of empires: Carthage, Rome, Egypt, Greece, Babylonia.

Each round starts off with trading. Then, each player uses their resources to build things. Then, players move their troops and triremes (and fight if they wish). Then you see if anyone's won and start the next round. The game has several win conditions, roughly based on

mastering trade, culture, military might, or having the highest score in each. It plays in about 90 minutes. It isn't a simulation by any means. For instance, Rome could be the Gilgamesh hero and gain the benefits. That doesn't make logical sense unless you think of it as Rome appropriating that cultural icon. Also, the only leaders of each empire that existed at the same time are Caesar and Cleopatra. So you have to think of the game as a pastiche of the ancient world rather than a literal simulation of it. That said, the way the game WORKS with trade, culture, and military, makes a lot of sense.

#5 **Ra**, by Reiner Knizia

Core mechanic: auction

[iOS app is 99 cents](#)



RA is a clever auction game in three rounds, or “epochs.” Tiles come out. Players bid on sets of them. You want to have people, pharaohs, Nile floods, in each epoch, and hopefully some great monument tiles at the end. As with Tigris & Euphrates by the same producer, RA pays homage to Egyptian art. Take a look at those flood tiles with the fish, for example. There are also tiles featuring several other gods, which grant you bonuses. It plays in about 45 minutes.

6. **Five Tribes, the Djinn of Naqala**, by Bruno Cathala

Core mechanic: mancala

This is a popular game with an Arabian Nights theme. Each of the different colors of meeples does something different. You play by picking up all the meeples on one of the tiles and then moving them a number of tiles equal to the number of meeples of one color in your hand, dropping one off per tile. The last color you're holding activates on the tile where you land, so you want to move like colors to like colors. That's a very unclear explanation. But anyway, you can stop at



Oases, build palaces, and get help from djinn. Fun fact: the game originally contained “slave” cards but they all got changed to “fakirs” within the first year of production.



7. **Imhotep**, by Phil Walker-Harding

Core mechanic: abstract strategy

Imhotep's a fast, simple game, fun for the family. You can either put stone blocks on your quarry, move stone from your quarry to a boat, or move a boat and do the action where the boat lands. That's it. When all the boats have sailed, you start the next round. You get points based on what the action was that you did, but maybe your opponent's blocks are on the ship you moved... so what helps you most

and doesn't help them as much?

8. **Kemet**, by Jacques Bariot and Guillame Montiage

Core mechanic: dudes on a map

As long as we're not thinking about historical accuracy, let's keep not thinking about historical accuracy. In Kemet, you take on the role of an Egyptian god. Your goal? Start fights and win. Do you get points for winning a battle as a defender in Kemet? No. Attack, attack, attack. Kemet doesn't even care about moving troops slowly across the desert from city to city. Oh no, have enough prayer power (ankhs) and you can teleport Stargate-style across the desert and wage war. It's fast, furious, and a whole lot of fun, with lots of great Egyptian thematic elements, but not even a pretense of historical accuracy. It's being remade as Kemet: Blood and Sand.



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9. **Cleopatra and the Society of Architects**, by Bruno Cathala and Ludovic Maublanc

Core mechanic: economic simulation

You're Cleopatra's builders and you're constructing her palace. The game is awesome because you get to watch the palace being constructed from 3d parts in real time. There's a corruption mechanic that lets you get ahead, but such that the person with the most corruption at the end



gets fed to Sobek. This is a new version of the original (2005?) game, which has been finished but is held up in shipping due to COVID-19. It's gorgeous, it's fun, a good family game.

10. **Museum**, by Olivier Melison and Eric Dubus

Core mechanic: set collection

Museum is a game about running museum exhibitions. The card art is beautiful, and there is a Middle East gallery. All the artifacts are real world pieces. It's very on-theme for the OI. You want to collect sets of artifacts to have on display, but you can't have too many extras or they're in storage and the public starts complaining. (There's a public opinion element to it.) It's relatively new.



EXTENDING INTO THE GREEK AND ROMAN ANCIENT WORLD

I wanted to mention a couple ancient world games that have Greek and Roman themes outside the OI's field of research but still great.



11. **Downfall of Pompeii**, by Klaus Jürgen-Wrede

Core mechanic: grid movement, hand management

This is a simple family game that plays in 45 minutes. Phase one: Pompeii is a happening place. Put all your families on the map according to the cards you have. Phase two: Pompeii is a flaming hellscape with lava flowing through the streets—evacuate your families as fast as possible before they die in a nightmarish flow of oozing magma and suffocating ash.

This is an old game between producers but widely available. It has a relatively accurate map of Pompeii as its board. So accurate that when I

was there for my second time in 2013, I kept passing the exits to Pompeii, muttering, "You can get your guys out here."

12. Colosseum, by Wolfgang Kramer and Marcus Lübke

Core mechanic: economics

Why did Tasty Minstrel Games create this version...



When this was what the previous version looked like?



We may never know.

Colosseum is a game that simulates running a theatre company in ancient Rome. You get your talent together, try to attract important senators, consuls, or the emperor, and offer them different entertainments, from singing to feeding gladiators to lions. It's wonderful, takes roughly an hour, and is ultimately satisfying for everyone playing. It feels good to build your own venue, attract patrons, and put on shows.

13. **Cyclades**, by Bruno Cathala and Ludovic Maublanc

Core mechanic: auction, dudes on a map



Another offering from the designers of Cleopatra, Cyclades is essentially an auction game in which you compete to sacrifice to the gods, but only the one who sacrifices the most gets the favor of each god. You might guess that a game with this many miniature figures involves a lot of fighting, and you would be wrong. You only fight if you successfully bid on Ares. You only do sea movement or battle if you successfully bid on Poseidon. Your real goal is to build two metropolises, which might involve no fighting at all,

or it might involve you stealing someone else's. The game is packed with mythological creatures. Like Kemet, it's more about mythology than history.

COMING SOMEDAY: Ankh: Gods of Egypt, by Eric Lang

Bonus, Video Game: Assassin's Creed Origins

For those of you hooked into video games these days, we highly recommend Assassin's Creed Origins, an action adventure game set in ancient Egypt near the end of the Ptolemaic period. The extensive world is well researched and offers you countless hours to wander around ancient Egypt, in and out of temples, pyramids, and houses. Another highlight of the series, Assassin's Creed Odyssey, allows players to explore an even more comprehensively rendered world in ancient Greece.

