

GAMING MATERIAL CULTURE AND HYBRIDITY: FINLAGGAN AND THE KINGDOM OF THE ISLES AT PLAY

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INTRODUCTION

A key objective of this chapter is to succinctly present the evidence for the playing of board and dice games in the Kingdom of the Isles, as an example of the region's social dynamics to set beside the better-known political dynamics, which several of the other chapters in this volume cover. One thing is certain in this regard, the politics on a day-to-day basis would have been informed by the dynamics of games play: its victories, its losses, its draws and its cheatings. The analysis offered is part of ongoing research on play in medieval Scotland in a European context.² The origin and initial development of board games was explored in a paper that examined the case to be made for the Roman introduction of board games into Britain and Ireland.³ It is a fitting place to begin this investigation, both as a telling example of hybridity itself and as a root for the medieval hybridity that is the core of this chapter.

ROMAN SEEDS IN CELTIC SOIL

Both archaeological and linguistic bodies of evidence, as they currently stand, are fully amenable to the interpretation that board games were a Roman introduction to northern and western Europe, part of a cultural package – also including literacy and wine – which was fundamental to cross-frontier cultural interaction.⁴ This paradigm is rooted in the ideas of Caillois and Dumazedier, both of whom argued for a culturally contextualised view of play.⁵ Board games are not universal in provenance but, as far as their western history is concerned, appear to have a specific origin in and dissemination from mid-fourth millennium

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- 1 I am grateful to Katherine Forsyth, Niall Sharples, David Caldwell, and Alan Macniven for their advice, support, and questions, as well as for the comments by an anonymous referee. All remaining errors are mine.
 - 2 For example, Hall 2007; 2009; 2011; Hall and Forsyth 2011; Caldwell, Hall, and Wilkinson 2009; 2010.
 - 3 Hall and Forsyth 2011.
 - 4 Gelastin 2010, 64-88.
 - 5 Caillois 2002 [1958]; Dumazedier 1968.

BC Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, spreading both east to India and west to the Mediterranean and thence to temperate Europe and north Africa. Cultural contacts with the Roman Empire were a key mechanism for board game diffusion; thus they entered the Germanic world, reaching far beyond the *limes* to Scandinavia. The process of dissemination was not a wholesale borrowing or slavish introduction but rather a creative indigenous response to stimulus in which board games were adapted to local cultural and social contexts. A clutch of board game equipment from first-century AD burials in south-east Britain are the key pieces of archaeological evidence and help to make the case for Celtic innovation upon Roman-introduced board games – paramount amongst them the Doctor's Grave, Stanway, Colchester (and its board laid in the grave for play).⁶ In addition, similarly-dated equipment is evident from the Gambler's Grave, Knowth, Ireland,⁷ and from slightly later dated sites in Scotland, notably Tarland and Scalloway.⁸

On the basis of the evidence from Stanway and Knowth, it can be suggested that board games reached Britain from newly-conquered Gaul at the very end of the first century BC. Gaming was then adopted by British elites of the south-east as part of a package of Continental and Roman culture (which also included wine-drinking, coinage, literacy, and burial with grave goods). Following the Roman conquest of the region in the mid-first century AD, the playing of Roman-style games became increasingly widespread, extending well beyond the imperial frontier from an early date. The gaming pieces from Tarland attest to their popularity amongst the Caledonian/Pictish elite. The Knowth evidence suggests that board-gaming reached Ireland either via direct Roman contact or through contact with indigenous elites in Britain. In the case of the latter, this could have occurred before the Roman conquest of Britain but certainly no later than a decade or two after that conquest and as part of a broader cultural package of interaction. The extent to which this was perceived as Roman, rather than British, is a moot point deserving further analysis.

HEBRIDEAN DICE

The gaming kit from Knowth includes three dice, and it is dice and their correlates and progenitors, 'astragali', which represent the earliest

6 Crummy 2007, 352-58; Schädler 2007, 359-74.

7 Eogan and Weekes 2012, 23-26.

8 Hall 2007, 6-7, 17-19; Wilson and Watson 1998, 174-75.

evidence we see in the Hebrides. They were used for the linked practices of gaming and divination/fortune-telling. The earliest forms of dice are the so-called parallelepiped variety. Such dice are generally numbered (with ring-and-dot motifs) on their four long faces, usually to represent three, four, five, and six (in varying orders), but not one and two. The shape of these dice may reflect the earlier tradition of lot forms, in which specific numbering was not marked but respective faces could be distinguished by differences in shape and colour. Casting sets of such lots was a form of fortune telling or divination. The dice were generally produced from the shafts of small long bones, typically the metapodials of sheep.⁹ The appropriateness of using these bones may ultimately derive from the suitability of the animal in sacrifice, which would have authenticated the additional use of elements of the carcass for divination. Usually the ends of such bones are open, but even when they are solid and intact – as with some antler examples – they are not generally numbered. The limited quantity of end-numbered dice include an example from the Rock of Cashel in Ireland (with both ends numbered five) and two from Scotland: the Broch of Ayre, Orkney (where one of the ends is marked with a single dot within a double circle),¹⁰ and Scalloway Broch, Shetland (where both ends are marked with four ring-and-dots).¹¹ These embellishments may be decorative or symbolic in a non-numerical way instead of representing additional dice values. This seems to be the case on a die from Bute, which has its ends decorated with a tri-lobed petal or leaf within a circle.¹² If the dice were being used as a set, the marking of the ends might distinguish a particular die from others in the same, or another, set. The Ayre and Bute examples are of a similar size to the Cashel example (whilst the Scalloway find is smaller).

Clarke catalogued twenty definite examples from Scotland – mainly from broch and wheelhouse sites in the Northern and Western Isles, with the exception of two from Caithness.¹³ It has previously been suggested that the more recent excavation of five dice from Scalloway did little to challenge their suggested dating convention of the first

9 MacGregor 1985, 129.

10 Clarke 1970, 30, no. 7.

11 Smith and Wilson 1998, 174

12 Clarke 1970, 229, no. 1.

13 Ibid.

quarter of the first millennium AD.¹⁴ However, closer analysis of the Scalloway dice suggests this to have been a hasty conclusion. In fact, their discovery pushes the dating range for such dice into the mid-first millennium AD. Four of them were recovered from the second phase. Although this phase is broadly dated between 100 BC and AD 500, the dice were stratigraphically linked to its terminus, suggesting a late-fifth century date. The fifth example originates from the start of phase three (AD 500-600), giving the whole group a tight dating and a hint of continuity in practice across a time of transition. The later dating of the Scalloway group also lends some support to the similar dating of the six dice from Dun Cuier, Barra.¹⁵ Although several authors subsequently questioned the dating, it was reaffirmed following a re-evaluation of Barra's archaeology by the Sheffield University SEARCH project.¹⁶ The gaming material at Dun Cuier also included at least one conical antler piece and a series of small stone discs.¹⁷ Five of the dice were found in the ashy deposits around the central hearth, probably where they were made, and helped to conjure up, for the excavator Youngs, 'the long northern nights, with the central fire and perhaps a feeble fish oil lamp the only means of lighting the interior of the dun'.¹⁸ Within the interior, use beside the fire makes sense. Their find spots may reflect divinatory rituals (with the dice deliberately placed about the hearth and left there, cf. Bornais comments below) rather than them simply being lost or abandoned during manufacture about the hearth. The dice from Foshigarry and Bac Mhic Connain, North Uist, could also date to the mid-first millennium AD, part of a range of objects indicating (non-exclusive) Irish contact across the Hebrides at this time.¹⁹

In 1984, Raftery noted that there were sixteen parallelepiped dice from Iron Age and early medieval Ireland – all of them bone except for a single wooden example from Ballinderry Crannog.²⁰ Raftery suggested the Irish material comprised two groups, differentiated in size: one small and one large – the smaller examples being earlier in date (i.e. earlier part of the first millennium AD). The same pattern has also been

14 Hall 2007, 9.

15 Youngs 1956, 319-20, fig. 13.5-10.

16 Brannigan and Foster 2002, 101.

17 Youngs 1956, 320, 324, fig. 13.20.

18 Ibid, 304.

19 Hallén 1994, 225-26; Armit 1996, 180.

20 Raftery 1984, 247.

observed in the Scottish material.²¹ More recently, both large and small examples have been excavated in Bornais, South Uist.²² Notably, these examples date to the fifth and sixth centuries AD, consistent with the late date for the Scalloway example referred to above.

As to the uses of such dice, these could have included gambling games, controlling moves in board games (with or without gambling), and fortune telling or divination (none of these uses being mutually exclusive). The dice from the Knowth ‘gamblers’-burial were interred alongside two sets of gaming pieces.²³ These applications might be accompanied by an intrinsic, emotional, or commemorative appeal to keep dice as heirlooms.²⁴

THE NORSE-GAEL TRANSITION: FROM BORNAIS TO LEWIS

By the second half of the first millennium AD, we can see a range of gaming equipment held in common by Picts, Scots, and Irish, evidenced by archaeological finds and textual records. In his paper on Applecross during the late Pictish period, Mac Lean quotes from the Old Irish *Scela Cano meic Gartnain*, describing Cano’s departure for Ireland with the people of Skye in AD 688:

[...] a royal retinue sailing in currachs, complete with fifty well-armed warriors, fifty well-dressed ladies and fifty liveried gillies each with the silver leads of two greyhounds in his right hand, a musical instrument in his left hand and a board of a fidcheall game on his back, along with the gold and silver playing men.²⁵

Fidcheall is the Irish name for a group of *tafl* games held in common across northern Europe, and known as ‘hnefatafl’ in Scandinavia. Potentially derived from the Roman game *Ludus Latrunculorum*, they were important in Scotland during the early medieval period, having been demonstrated by Ritchie to be an example of the cultural tradition common to Picts, Scots, and other Celtic peoples, representing a ‘[...] direct link between Ireland, Dalriada and northern Pictland, presumably

21 Smith and Wilson 1998, 174.

22 Sharples 2012.

23 Hall and Forsyth 2011, 1328-1330.

24 For new thinking on recognising heirlooms in the archaeological record, see Gilchrist 2013.

25 Mac Lean 1997, 174.



Figure 1: Parallelepiped dice and astragali from Bornais, South Uist (Copyright and courtesy Department of Archaeology, University of Cardiff).

through a common heritage'.²⁶

From a Scandinavian perspective, perhaps the pivotal excavated site – spanning the fifth to fourteenth centuries – is Bornais, South Uist, which serves as a compelling window to a world that transitioned from Pictish to Norse to Gaelic. There are elements of gaming kits from all the excavated mounds of the settlement at Bornais. The late Iron Age or Pictish occupation of Mound 1 (approximately spanning the fifth to ninth centuries) substantially comprised a house, which was burnt down, rebuilt, and then completely dismantled during the mid-first millennium AD. The excavated gaming kit includes two parallelepiped dice, two astragali, a variety of ceramic and shell counters, and three pegged playing pieces (probably from a *tafl* game).²⁷ Previously, I have discussed the use of these and other astragali and parallelopiped dice for divination. The Mound 1 excavation report interprets the context of the finds – unburnt and placed in the burnt layer of the fire-consumed

²⁶ Ritchie 1987, 62.

²⁷ Sharples 2012, 84-87, 266-71, 281, fig. 182, nos. 1880, 2244, 2400.

wheel-house – as indicating an act of divination, perhaps to determine the propitiousness of reoccupying the house site, with the divination tools buried afterwards.²⁸ I have drawn comparisons to the unusual chequer-like design on one of the Bornais astragali, likening it to a pattern on a stone disc from Shetland.²⁹ Intriguingly, it is now suggested that the pattern on the Bornais piece may represent a recording of events, potentially associated with the divinatory use of the astragalus.³⁰ Although both astragali and parallelepiped dice gradually fell out of fashion, their divinatory and gaming functions endured in conventional cubic dice and other objects. From the Norse middens and centre of Mound 2a (in use between the late-tenth and fourteenth centuries), four such dice were recovered, three of them blanks (indicating on-site manufacture and associated with bone-making debris) and one numbered non-conventionally with opposing faces 1:6, 2:4 and 3:5.³¹ Introduced in Roman times, the cubic shape was by far the commonest form of medieval die. In addition, several complete or fragmentary pieces of Scandinavian type were found, most notably cylindrical and piriform examples, particularly used in hnefatafl.³²

In terms of gaming practice there seems to be no significant cultural barrier from Pictish to Norse to Gaelic; variations in the design of pieces do not mask the type of game in question, whilst discoveries of kits inside houses (in different room spaces), in middens, and in ancillary buildings suggest a wide social accessibility. This does not mean, however, that any social hierarchy within a community would not be partially reflected by gaming kits made of higher-quality and more expensive materials. Finds of some pieces within the central space of the wheelhouse are paralleled by gaming piece from the central area of another wheelhouse at Cnip, Lewis.³³ However, this material is stratigraphically dated to the first century AD, presenting an untenable date for a type of gaming piece most closely paralleled by wooden examples from twelfth-to-fourteenth-century Minsk and Novgorod.³⁴ Although their materials are different, the pieces are stylistically identical

28 Hall 2007, 21-25; Sharples 2012, 84, 263.

29 Hall 2007, 22-23.

30 Sharples 2012, 268.

31 Sharples forthcoming.

32 Ibid.

33 Armit 2006, table 2.3; Hunter 2006, 150.

34 Armit 2006, 221; Linder 1994, 175 (plate), 210 (plate); Rybina 2007, 355-56.

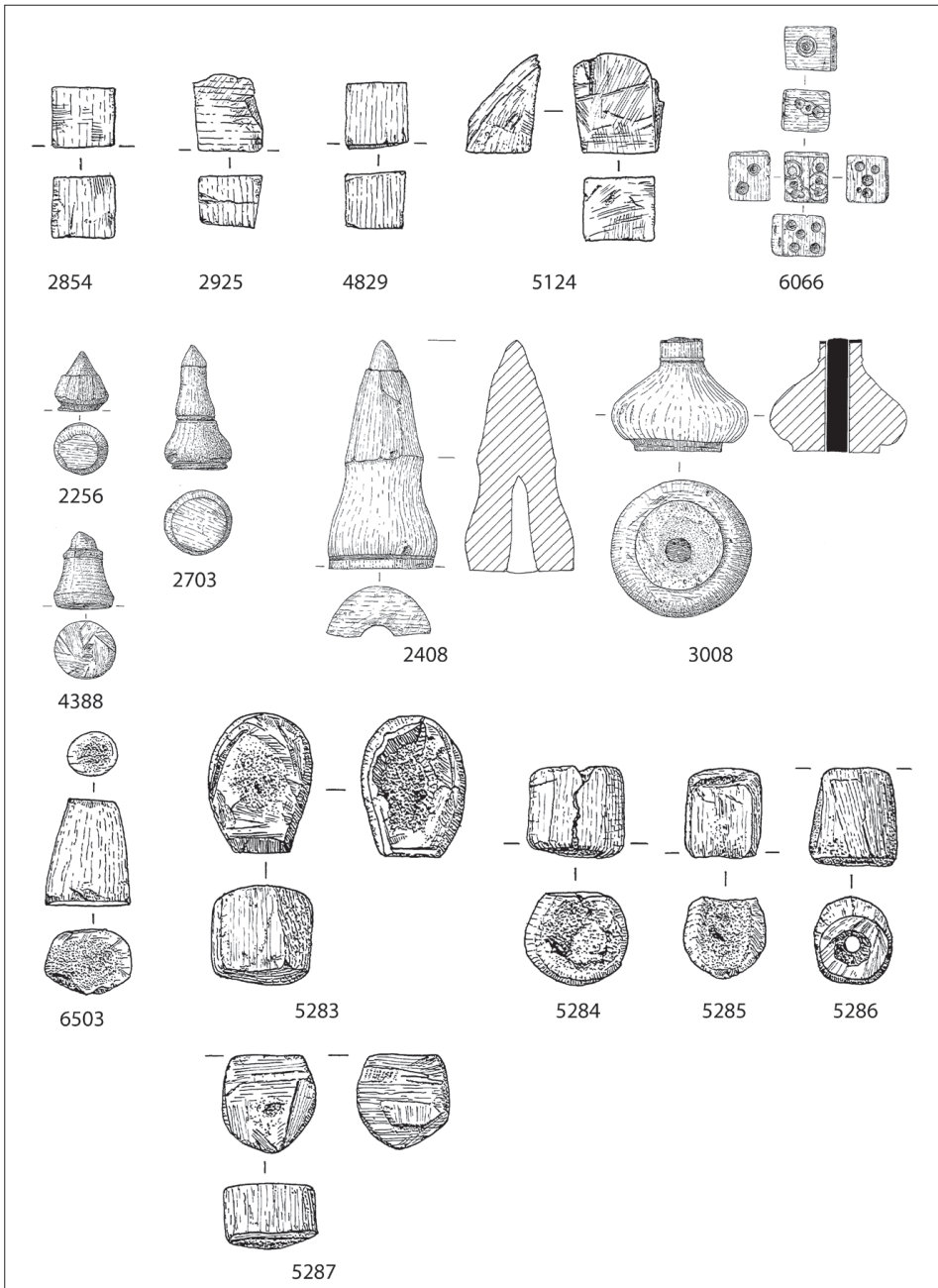


Figure 2: Norse period gaming pieces from Bornais, South Uist (Copyright and courtesy Department of Archaeology, University of Cardiff).

(if less accomplished or more worn in Cnip), sharing a Scandinavian background of Viking colonisation. As such, the Cnip piece is more likely to relate to local Norse evidence, including a Viking cemetery, and may have ended up in the wheelhouse area through disturbances in the stratigraphy of the sand that covered the site.³⁵

The more limited quantities and range of material from other sites in the Uists – Udal,³⁶ Foshigarra and Bac Mhic Connain,³⁷ Sollas,³⁸ Machair Leathan,³⁹ and the Norse house of Drimore⁴⁰ – confirm this picture of board games as a staple social pursuit across cultural contexts. From the settlement complex at the Udal (especially Udal North) comes a range of medieval finds approximately spanning the ninth to thirteenth



Figure 3: A selection of the Norse and medieval gaming kit from the Udal North mound, North Uist (photograph by Mark A Hall for CnES Udal Archaeology Project).

35 Armit 1996, 197-201.

36 The Udal material has not been published but has been recently examined by the author with a view to full publication. For a general background, see Crawford 1986 and Ballin Smith 2012.

37 Hallén 1994.

38 Campbell 1991.

39 Beveridge 1911.

40 Maclaren 1974.

centuries, primarily made of bone and comparable to the material from Bornais, South Uist (see above), and Lödöse, Sweden (as yet unpublished but examined by the author). The most distinct piece from the Udal, in the context of the Isles, is a well-made but damaged bone disc, decorated with ring-and-dot and presumably used for the game of tables.

The late Iron Age sites at Foshigarry, Bac Mhic Connain, and Sollas (all in North Uist) provide the typical parallelepiped dice and pegged playing pieces, whilst Machair Leathan (South Uist) provides a decorated, domed bone piece echoing a Roman-style gaming piece. The Norse house at Drimore (South Uist) contributes a conical playing piece – the head of a pegged piece – like the other pieces just listed, used in a variant of *hnefatafl*/*fidcheall*. The Uig area of Lewis provides us with some key evidence for the continuity and changes to these games and their social stratification. The Lewis hoard of gaming pieces includes possible *hnefatafl* pieces, tablesmen, and, of course, a series of well-known chess pieces. Their late-twelfth to early-thirteenth-century dating makes them very early figurative chess pieces, possibly the earliest from the Isles, although they are mixed with abstract pieces equally suitable as chess or *hnefatafl* pawns. More singular abstract chess pieces are signalled by a chess knight from Rothesay Castle, Bute, which is in a style that predates figurative pieces. Rothesay Castle, however, is no earlier in date than the late-twelfth century (or, more likely, early-thirteenth); given that abstract pieces continued to be made and used after the introduction of figurative pieces, a thirteenth-century date for this find is not impossible. The example from Rothesay may well be contemporary with the Lewis pieces, possibly reflecting a different cultural influence: an Anglo-Norman one. There are similar abstract pieces in ivory and jet from Coldingham, Kirkwall, and Perth, dating as late as the fourteenth century.

The hoard of gaming pieces from Lewis is generally regarded as being of Norse origin. Its deliberate presence on Lewis and in the Hebrides is strongly indicative of the Norse-Gael transition. Documentary and literary corroboration for this is provided by a thirteenth-century supplicatory address to Islay's Lord, Aonghus Mór MacDomhnaill (d. 1296), seeking payment for a debt owed by his father, Donald, great grandson of Somerled (the progenitorial 'Lord of the Isles'). In his analysis of the poem, Bateman remarks on the manner in which the



Figure 4: A selection of the Lewis chessmen (Copyright and courtesy British Museum).

poet – who may have been Irish – refers to Aonghus’ illustrious Norse ancestors, which went out of fashion as Clan Domhnaill and other Hebrideans came to assert a more exclusively Gaelic identity.⁴¹ The first two verses (of a total of thirty-one) help to establish the cultural context to be explored here, and I quote them from the recent translation by Thomas Clancy:

Ceannaigh duan t’athar, a Aonghas, [Purchase your father’s poem, Aenghus

41 *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 53.

agad atá teach an ríogh:
As tú fréamha is bláth an bhile,
Adéara cách dlighi a dhíol.

the house of the king is yours,
You are the tree's root and blossom:
all say it's right that you buy it.

Agad do fhágaibh a láithreach,
leat gach lúireach, leat gach séad,
a áit a luirg 's a chloidhmhe corra
duit 's a fhoirne donna dead.

To you he left his position,
yours each mail shirt, each treasure,
His hats, his staves, his slender swords
Yours his brown ivory chess-sets.]⁴²

Although the poem describes Aenghus as king of Lewis, we cannot discount that this may be merely flattery, perhaps as part of the poet's aim to persuade Aenghus to do his kingly duty and settle his father's debts. Hence, the long listing of possessions he inherits from his father Donald (the eponym of Clan Donald) includes, of course, his ivory chess sets, or, more accurately, sets of playing pieces.⁴³ The poem, then, is an acknowledgement of the importance of chess and board games as an elite pursuit, an indication of their elite status, and an affirmation of their role in carrying social identity across familial generations (again raising the prospect of them being passed on as heirlooms).

This word picture of chess (or rather board games) as a key attribute of noble accomplishment and elite lifestyle echoes those found in other European texts describing skill at board games. Petrus Alfonsi, in his *Disciplina Clericalis* (c. 1100-1125), lists chess as one of the seven skills of a good knight, whilst in the chanson *Huon de Bordeaux* (c. 1200), the knight-hero (disguised as a minstrel) intones nine attributes, including unsurpassed skill at chess and tables.⁴⁴ For the elites of the North Sea world, *Orkneyinga Saga* lists board games as the first of nine key skills or attributes of a nobleman, featuring in a poem by Kali Kolsson before he is made Earl Rognvald.⁴⁵ The word being translated to 'chess' in both cases is *tafl*, which, although not literally meaning 'chess', certainly came to denote that game. Its literal meaning of 'table' (i.e. a board game) was applied to *hnefatafl* and its variants long before chess. The idea of playing of games as one of the marks of a great man became an aspect

42 *The Triumph Tree*, 288-91.

43 On the implication of sets and their colour, see Hall 2014a.

44 Eales 1986, 15; Vale 2001, 171; Murray 1913, 738.

45 *Orkneyinga Saga*, ch. 58; the same, alternative translation of this poem can be found in both Bibire 1988, 226, and *The Triumph Tree*, 190.

of the panegyric code found in Gaelic poetry,⁴⁶ although texts surviving from the seventeenth century onwards cite the games as tables (i.e. backgammon), dice, and cards.⁴⁷ These documents include verses such as:

Gu talla nam píos	[To the hall of cups
Far am faramaich' fion,	Where wine-quaffing makes din,
Far am falaichear mìle crann	where a thousand bets are concealed

Bhiodh cruit is clarsach	A harp and a clarsach
'S mnà uchd-àille	and fair-bosomed women
An tùr nan tàileasg geàrr	in the tower of the short gaming boards' [tables]

Ruaig air dhisnean,	Dice being shaken
Foirm air thitibh	pieces on tables
'S òr a sios mar gheall,	and gold thrown down as stake,

Aig ogha Iarla Ile	In the hall of the grandson
Agus Chinn Tìre,	of the Earl of Islay,
Rois is Innse Gall	of the Hebrides, Kintyre and Ross] ⁴⁸

Dh'fhaighte an t'aras	[In your house could be counted
Ceòl nan clarsach,	music of the clarsach,
Fòirne air thàilìs,	a crowd at the gammon,
Mnà uch-àillte	fair-bosomed women
As crùin an geall mun cuairt	and crowns being waged all round] ⁴⁹

Gu àras mo ruin	[To the hall of my love
'N cluinnte clàrsaochean ciùil,	Where harp's music was heard,
Iomairt thàilìs air chrùntaibh òir	Gambling at the gammon for crowns of gold] ⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Caldwell et al. 2009, 177, 180-81.

⁴⁷ *Gair Nan Clarsach*, 100-5, 126-27; *An Lasair*, 67.

⁴⁸ *Song to Dòmhnall Gorm Og MacDonald of Sleat*, written in the mid-seventeenth century by the vernacular poet Iain Lom. In *Gair Nan Clarsach*, 100-5, verses 8, 9, 12, 13.

⁴⁹ *A Song to Lord Grant*, written c. 1640 by Seumas MacGriogair, in *Gair Nan Clarsach*, 122-27, verse 2.

⁵⁰ *Let the Song Make its Way*, written c. 1695 by Iain Lom, to Dòmhnall a' Chogaidh, and in which 'gammon' is backgammon or tables. In *Gair Nan Clarsach*, 162-63, verse 3.

The implications and aspiration of the panegyric code were not universally accepted, however. Donald Monro's 1549 account of the Hebrides, containing a comment on the passing or decline of the Lordship of the Isles, still holds an echo of gaming as he states that Finlaggan councillors carried on 'albeit their Lord were at his hunting or at any other games'.⁵¹ The account seems to be identifying such pursuits not with the strength of kings and nobles but their self-indulgence and lack of responsibility. This is both a rhetorical argument by Monro, aimed to fuel his retrospective 1540 reasoning, and a typical anti-gaming sentiment, representing a strand of moral, reforming zeal throughout the medieval period.

FINLAGGAN IN FOCUS: THE ISLES AT PLAY

Remaining on Islay, excavations at Finlaggan have given us some crucial evidence for the importance of gaming to the social identity of the medieval Lords of the Isles, as well as their retinues and households. To date, these excavations have not furnished any pieces of the quality of the Lewis gaming hoard, perhaps in part because such pieces may remain in the unexcavated areas of the site, notably its underwater middens. However, we must also take into account the peripatetic nature of the Lordship of the Isles, which would undoubtedly have seen the foremost pieces of gaming equipment moving around with their Lord as well as being much more carefully looked after. From evidence elsewhere, we know that the best-quality pieces were only discarded in exceptional circumstances, a good example being the Gloucester *tabulae* – or tables – set (discussed below). The bulk of the evidence from Finlaggan is more prosaic, indicating that such pastimes were not confined to the amusements of the elite but were much more widely enjoyed. By the end of the European medieval period, its various polities and cultural zones had their own ideas on which games were the most popular: usually chess, tables or nine men's morris. There was also a widespread social satire that depicted chess as the game of kings and nobles, tables as that of burgesses, and nine men's morris as that of the peasantry and urban poor.⁵² The evidence from Finlaggan is broadly in line with this satire or parody, consisting of a graffiti gaming board,

51 Caldwell 2003, quoting Monro's *Western Isles of Scotland and Genealogies of the Clans*, 57.

52 Hall 2001.



Figure 5: Fragment of incised stone gaming board (alquerque) from Finlaggan, Islay (Copyright and courtesy NMS).

stone discs, and bone tablesmen. As such, they form an appropriate peg on which to hang an examination of the wider contexts of such material.

The graffiti board is the only fragment of a gaming board so far found at Finlaggan. The board design is scratched as a graffito on a mica-schist/schistose slate. It was found in the 1993 excavation season, in the fill of a beam slot that relates to the abandonment of building H. Its use as a gaming board presumably predates its use as a building slate, the graffito having possibly been scratched out to pass the time during construction work. The fragment of board design comprises two conjoined squares cut by horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines. In the left hand square, the central crossing point for all the lines

is marked by a somewhat broken circle, whilst a hint of something in the right hand square is evident. Although incomplete, its design suggests that the board was intended for the game 'alquerque', despite the fact that the aforementioned circle motifs do not normally occur on an alquerque board.⁵³ Incised or graffiti alquerque boards seem to have been quite rare in Britain until comparatively recently. Examples have been recorded from the cloisters of Norwich Cathedral, from Norwich Castle, and from St Mary's Church, Cavendish, Suffolk. From Scotland, numbers have increased significantly, with eighteen boards or fragments thereof known to this author. There are twelve examples from Inchmarnock (or thirteen if we include an unrecognised example from its assemblage of slates),⁵⁴ two examples from Castle Sween,⁵⁵ a fragment from Carrick Castle,⁵⁶ a fragment from Dundonald Castle,⁵⁷ a previously unrecognised example from Threave Castle, Galloway,⁵⁸ and an unfinished example from Ballumbie Church, Angus.⁵⁹ All of these boards are broadly dateable between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Although we can be reasonably certain that the Finlaggan fragment is an alquerque board, we can be less certain about what games were played on it. The Spanish Alfonso Codex of 1283, a gaming compendium compiled for King Alfonso X ('the Wise') of Leon and Castille, describes three variations of the game, using three, nine, or twelve pieces for each of two players. These appear to be identical to the game of merels (also known as morris or mill), but alquerque now tends to be separately classified.⁶⁰ Alquerque seems more accurately equated with games such as 'Fox and Geese'. The Spanish variant of this – 'Catch the Hare' – is also recorded in the Alfonso Codex as being played on the alquerque board.⁶¹ That being said, the types of board used for nine men's morris and alquerque were, again according to the Alfonso Codex, different.⁶² The gaming pieces used on each board – resembling abstract chess

53 For the game, see Murray 1952, fig. 27; Parlett 1999, fig. 151a.

54 Ritchie 2008, 119. The unrecognised example is IS61: Lowe 2008, 168-69.

55 Ewart and Triscott 1996, illus. 15.52, 16.52.

56 Ewart and Baker 1998, illus. 23.29.

57 Caldwell 2004, 101, illus. 49.

58 Good and Tabraham 1981, fig. 13, no. 201.

59 Hall unpublished; forthcoming, 6 and table 1, no. 2.

60 Parlett 1999; Murray 1952.

61 Parlett 1999, 187 and fig. 12.1.

62 Endrei and Zolnay 1986, pl. 28 [alquerque], pl. 50 [nine men's morris].



Figure 6: Two bone tablesmen from Finlaggan, Islay (Copyright and courtesy NMS).

pawns – do appear to have been identical, further widening the range of games that some of the Lewis hoard pieces could have been used for. Of course, it should come as no surprise to learn that boards and pieces were used as flexibly as possible, not least to minimise the amount of equipment needed when travelling. From the fourteenth century, triple game boards (combining chess, tables, and merels) were becoming increasingly popular in Europe. Although it would be easy to see the fragment of a gaming board from Finlaggan as a rather ephemeral, low status item, this need not have been the case. It could, for example, have been part of a kit used for teaching, possibly indicating that building H, with which it was associated, had a school function. Slates from numerous sites in the Isles and on the west coast indicate such a teaching function, most notably at the monasteries of Inchmarnock, off Bute, and Kilwinning, Ayrshire. A large number of boards from Inchmarnock include examples for *hnefatafl*, merels, and *alquerque*, whilst a smaller but still significant clutch, recently excavated at Kilwinning, comprises mainly unprovenanced finds from within the chapter house and cloister area, the latter location having the best light for such play within a monastery. At both Inchmarnock and Kilwinning, there are additional slates incised with pictures and practice letters, adding weight to their educational function. However, such slates do not appear to have been

the sole preserve of ecclesiastical sites, as there are several secular sites in Ayrshire and Argyll that exhibit smaller quantities of the same range of material. This suggests that an element of learning, including literacy and games play, was being practiced within castle environments (though presumably using clerics as teachers). At Dundonald Castle, Ayrshire, excavations recovered fragments of a slate incised alquerque board, a daldos board, and two merels boards, one of them also incised for writing, with the probable phrase *in nomine* clearly visible.⁶³ At Carrick Castle, Argyll and Bute, the gaming kit excavated comprises a fragment of alquerque board, an incomplete daldos board, and a stone counter incised with a queen-like graffito (possibly a draughts piece or an improvised chess piece).⁶⁴ Also in Argyll and Bute, excavations at Castle Sween produced three fragments of alquerque boards and a stone disc with a graffito on each face.⁶⁵ Along with the much larger incised slate assemblages from Inchmarnock (discussed above) and from St Blane's monastery, Kingarth, Bute,⁶⁶ they are linked to a wider group of sites with similar slates from the western littoral of Britain, including St Patrick's Isle (castle and cathedral), Peel, Isle of Man,⁶⁷ and Tintagel Castle and Church, Cornwall,⁶⁸ demonstrating a ready access to slate as both a raw material and a reused or recycled one.

A great number of stone discs were excavated from Finlaggan, but the larger amongst these are unlikely to be gaming pieces, more likely serving as cooking or storage-pot lids, for example.⁶⁹ Even the more appropriately-sized discs are not automatically gaming pieces, as McLees observed when discussing the similar stone discs from Trondheim: 'it is possible that these stone discs represent finished items designed for some other function or that the majority were blanks destined to become perforated and perhaps decorated spindle whorls'.⁷⁰ Alternatively, the discs may have been components in some sort of rudimentary system of weights and measures, or tokens related to counting or tallying. A total of thirty-eight stone discs were excavated at Finlaggan

63 Caldwell 2004, fig. 49 and see 106, no. 86 and fig.47 for a stone gaming disc.

64 Ewart and Baker 1998, illus. 23.

65 Ewart and Triscott 1996. 542-54.

66 Anderson 1900.

67 Freke 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; Cubbon 2002; Trench-Jellicoe 2002.

68 Thorpe 1989; Nowakowski and Thomas 1990; 1992.

69 cf. Scalloway: Sharples 1998, 144-6, 180.

70 McLees 1990, 67.

– several on Council Island – and these are broken down into four size groupings: small (twenty-five examples), medium (six examples), large (five examples), and very large (two examples). Comparable but slightly larger collections of such discs were recovered from Jarlshof (Shetland), Hurly Hawkin (Angus), and Whithorn (Galloway).⁷¹ Like the assemblage from Whithorn, Finlaggan has produced none of the more polished types identified in Henshall's scheme for the Hurly Hawkin material, most of them being roughly chipped discs. It is worth noting that much smaller quantities of discs (of stone and other materials) have been found throughout Britain and further afield, dating from the Neolithic to the post-medieval period.⁷²

The small and medium pieces are most relevant here, the former being particularly compatible in size with the alquerque board fragment. Overall, such pieces have previously been accepted as gaming counters, and no obvious reason exists to suggest otherwise for Finlaggan.⁷³ Given its function as a high-status feasting site, one would expect evidence of corollary activities like gaming. There is a clear size compatibility between some of the Finlaggan discs and its gaming board but none of the material comes from what we might call a context of play. In other words, the contexts in which the pieces were found – including middens, gardening soil, and postholes – are all secondary in terms of gaming activity. They are indicative of loss and disposal of the material after their active use. Those that were misplaced would presumably be no great loss, and the ephemeral nature of the discs (and their use) certainly makes this likely. For an example of such gaming kit in an archaeological context of use rather than loss, we need only to look across the water to the Antrim coast. There, by the early-sixteenth century, the possessions of the MacDonald lordship included Dunluce Castle, where the excavation of a blacksmith's workshop has revealed something of the social spread of gaming. The workshop was situated at a central crossroads of the town of Dunluce, founded in 1608 (along with a manor house) to succeed the castle. In and around the smithy, a mixture of stone discs and a conical gaming piece were found (along with a cluster of clay pipe fragments), leading the smithy to be interpreted as a pivotal social space for the community to pass

71 Hamilton 1956; Henshall 1982; Nicholson 1997.

72 For a detailed listing, see Hall forthcoming.

73 Though Henshall 1982, 235, explores the possibility of rubbing or grinding tools.

the time.⁷⁴ The use of a smithy as a social gaming space acts as a counterpoint to those lordly gaming spaces implied in the Gaelic poetry cited above.

The final, key element of the Finlaggan gaming assemblage to be discussed is its three bone counters or playing pieces, all from fifteenth-century contexts; two from house floors and one from the cobbling of a path. All three pieces are readily identifiable as belonging to the tablesmen group of gaming pieces. Such pieces, along with dice, were used in the game of tables (although they would also have been suitable for draughts later on). Tables were a family of games, ultimately deriving from the Roman game of *tabula* and today surviving as backgammon.⁷⁵ Popular throughout the medieval period, their reputation is apparent from the numerous finds of pieces and boards (notable examples including the sets from Gloucester, England, and Mayenne, France),⁷⁶ as well as medieval depictions of the game (e.g. on the misericords in Manchester Cathedral and St George's Chapel, Windsor, both late-fifteenth century).⁷⁷

The two smaller examples from Finlaggan were found together, one bearing zoomorphic decoration and the other geometric interlace. This decorative difference does not argue against a close association, as they may well represent opposing sides of the same set of pieces. Of course, we cannot rule out that the pieces represent two separate sets, with each side in each set being of similar design but distinguished in colour. Sets may also have been of mixed media; black-stained wooden discs, for example, could have been opposed by bone or ivory pieces rather than pale wooden ones.⁷⁸ By contrast, the third piece is about a third bigger than the other two pieces and more plainly decorated. Both types fit into recognised series.

The zoomorphic smaller piece bears a depiction of a prancing quadruped. Its head is turned backwards, its mouth is open to display a protruding tongue, and a short, single horn rises from its forehead. The whole beast pushes against the border of the disc, refusing to be confined by it. There are two close parallels to this; an antler tablesmen

74 Breen 2012, 159-60, fig. 6.23.

75 Murray 1952, 57-69; Parlett 1999, 58-87.

76 Watkins 1985, 41-69; Darvill 1988, 81-85; Grandet and Goret 2012.

77 Hall and Leahy 1996; Hall 2009.

78 Egan 1998, 294.

from Trondheim, Norway, is decorated with a prancing beast in a mid-twelfth-century Urness-Romanesque style but found in a late-thirteenth-to-fourteenth-century context.⁷⁹ The beast lacks a horn and has a long, pointed tail but otherwise has a strikingly similar pose. The second parallel is also a tablesman, of walrus ivory, from the mid-twelfth century.⁸⁰ It boasts a greater sophistication of treatment than either the Trondheim or the Finlaggan piece.⁸¹ Beckwith describes the beast as a dragon, but the clear lack of wings and single horn rising from the forehead surely indicates a unicorn. This is also a likely identification for the Finlaggan piece.

From Scotland, there is a small tally of figurative, bone gaming pieces: a crowned mermaid from Iona Abbey, a grotesque from Dalcross Castle, a rabbit or hare from the Bishop's Palace of Kirkwall, a centaur from Stonehaven, a horseman and rabbit from Urquhart Castle, and an eagle from Melrose Abbey.⁸² None of these pieces originate from a secure archaeological context and have been conventionally dated, on artistic grounds, to the eleventh and twelfth century, consistent with the wider European Romanesque series of such pieces.⁸³ More recently, however, the pieces from Iona and Rhum have been dated to the fifteenth or sixteenth century, in line with the West Highland art tradition.⁸⁴ The vitality and prevalence of that tradition does not exclude the possibility of such gaming pieces. However, the figurative nature of all but two of them suggests that they do owe something to the earlier Romanesque tradition, indicating a potential strand of conservatism within West Highland culture.⁸⁵ This could have been fuelled by the generational transfer of such gaming pieces as heirlooms.

79 McLees 1990, fig. 26, 64-65, 204.

80 Beckwith 1972, cat. 159, illus. 256.

81 McLees 1990, 65, where he also notes that the backward looking animal motif is 'not uncommon in connection with Continental gaming discs [...] (see Goldschmidt 1975 [1926], various)'.

82 Society of Antiquaries of Scotland 1952-53, 204; 1871, 321; 1896-97, 80; Kluge-Pinsker 1991, cat. B60, B57, B56, B58, B55; Glenn 2003, 182-83; Caldwell 1982, 27; Beckwith 1972, cat. 110; Samson 1982, 475, fig. 6.92; Innis 1852, 297.

83 Mann 1977. These are all made of skeletal material, and the copper alloy exceptions from Ireland – including the four in Roe 1945, 766-69 – have recently been interpreted as weights, and are thus displayed in the 'Medieval Ireland 1150-1550' gallery of the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.

84 Glenn 2003, 184-85.

85 Steer and Bannerman 1977, 186-87.

The smaller of the two interlace-decorated pieces from Finlaggan is much worn, but appears to be composed of two bands of interlace with pellets used to fill the gaps. As such, it resembles some of the interlace and pellet work on the Fife and Eglinton bone caskets.⁸⁶ As noted by Steer and Bannerman, although the ‘combination of pellets and interlacing occurs on tenth-eleventh century Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture in northern England, Galloway and the Isle of Man and on earlier metalwork [...] plaitwork with interspersed pellets is found on the head of a cross of fifteenth century date at Kilfinan’.⁸⁷ The Fife and Eglinton caskets, as well as the importance of the casket as a motif in West Highland art, suggest a further possible relevance to this discussion. Such caskets would have had a number of storage uses, for ‘[...] letters, personal ornaments, keys etc.’⁸⁸ and, in addition, to hold gaming pieces. The Eglinton and Fife caskets certainly have the capacity for such storage. Caskets like these were common in medieval Europe, in a variety of materials: ivory, wood, leather and metal, as well as bone.⁸⁹ Found on a number of sites, fragments, particularly of bone, add to the number of surviving, complete examples. Most notably, these include fragments from Loughor Castle, Glamorgan, which have been interpreted as the remains of a box for storing gaming pieces (for chess and tables) found at the same site.⁹⁰ The possessions of Henry VIII included a large number of surviving, complete caskets, chests, and boxes, of which some were used to store chess and tables sets, as recorded in the inventory made following Henry’s death.⁹¹ Nothing resembling a chest or casket mount has been recovered from Finlaggan, although a latch from a casket lock was recovered from the same context as the two bone counters. The site also produced a small key, suitable for locking such a casket, as well as a copper-alloy corner strengthener, which could have been fitted to a casket corner

86 Callendar 1926; Glenn 2003, 186-91.

87 Steer and Bannerman 1977, 175-76.

88 Ibid., 176.

89 For examples, see Cherry 1982, 132-40.

90 Redknap 1993, 150-58.

91 *The Inventory of King Henry VIII*, e.g. nos. 3085, 3228, 3234, 3444, 11662; Haywood 1997, 8-15.

or purse (which could also be used for the keeping of gaming pieces).⁹² The decorative repertoire and style of the Fife and Eglinton caskets has led to their late medieval attribution. However, the aforementioned gaming piece bears only pellet and interlace, and thus a slightly earlier date cannot be ruled out. A slightly larger fifteenth-to-sixteenth-century whalebone playing piece, decorated with a similar interlace pattern, was found in a cave on Rhum, and is on display in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh.⁹³ Several pieces, now lost, were also found at St Andrews and Forfar Loch.⁹⁴ The only other bone tablesman exhibiting interlace known to this author is an example from a twelfth-century context at Ashagover Abbey, Lough Corrib, bearing (worn) simple zoomorphic interlace.⁹⁵ We should also note a wooden disc from Trondheim, carved with double-thread interlace and dated to the eleventh or early-twelfth century.⁹⁶

The third bone disc is somewhat larger, its upper surface incised with two concentric circles just inside the rim and a central compass point within a small circle. It is thus very similar to the small group of tablesmen within the Lewis hoard.⁹⁷ Its condition is marred by a series of deep penetrating splits running across the upper surface. The simpler geometric style of decoration on this piece distinguishes it from the other two bone playing pieces, and, again, is consistent with a wider series of such items. These simpler forms of larger tablesmen come in a variety of materials – bone, stone, re-used pottery, and wood – with an assortment of ring and dot and/or concentric circle decorations. Examples include Perth High Street,⁹⁸ Urquhart Castle,⁹⁹ and Aberdeen.¹⁰⁰ These range in date from the twelfth to fifteenth century. Outside Scotland, the picture is similar, and a brief list could include Goltho (Lincolnshire),¹⁰¹

92 Full publication of this material is pending in Caldwell forthcoming, but see also Caldwell 2014, 237-39.

93 Glenn 2003, 185.

94 Hall 2007, 23-24; Munro 1882, 20-25, fig. 7; Hay-Fleming 1931, 197-98, fig. 15.

95 Roe 1945, 157, fig. 3.

96 McLees 1990, 72.

97 Stratford 1997, illus. 35.

98 MacGregor 2011, 101-02; Curteis et al. 2012, 283.

99 Samson 1982, 475, fig. 6.

100 MacGregor 1982, 182, illus. 104, where they are described as spindle whorls. They do, however, fit with this series as well, and the ambiguity between such spindle whorls and gaming pieces, alluded to above, is discussed by MacGregor 1985, 137, 187; Hall & Leahy 1996, 235.

101 Beresford 1987, 191-2.

Loughor Castle (Glamorgan),¹⁰² London,¹⁰³ York,¹⁰⁴ and Trondheim.¹⁰⁵ There are also variations: from Rothesay Castle, Bute – and on display in Bute Museum¹⁰⁶ – originates a bone tablesman, decorated with a floral motif within concentric circles, paralleled by wooden examples from Threave Castle and Perth.¹⁰⁷ Perhaps the implication is that there were standardised sets in circulation.

The single, larger tablesman from Finlaggan is ostensibly less accomplished than the two smaller pieces and perhaps supports the idea of board games being locally played across all social levels. The Lord of the Isles and his elite companions were peripatetic in their occupation of Finlaggan, and so it would have been for their prized sets of chess and tables. What was not peripatetic was the poorer quality material culture of the permanent occupants who cared for the site in the absence of their Lord. Nevertheless, chess pieces and pegged pieces are notably absent from the Finlaggan assemblage. We know from Aenghus Mór's poem that playing pieces for board games – presumably chess but also *hnefatafl* and its Irish correlate *fidcheall* – would have been familiar, whilst excavations at Kilellan Farm, Ardnave, demonstrate that pegged playing pieces were used on Islay as throughout the rest of the Isles.¹⁰⁸ The importance of high status gaming – tables, chess and *fidcheall*/*hnefatafl* in particular – undoubtedly continued at Finlaggan. Both here and across the Isles, the ruins of various halls underline the importance of feasting as part of the cultural dynamic and exercise of power of the region.¹⁰⁹ Combining the evidence for gaming and feasting, a mixture still alive in the seventeenth-century poems quoted above, allows us to observe how individual aspects of culture may be combined to produce fuller statements of identity. It is therefore appropriate to draw on some telling Irish evidence.

The twelfth-century Book of Leinster and the fourteenth-century Book of Leccan record the layouts and seating arrangements for royal

102 Redknap 1993, 150-58.

103 Egan 1998, 294.

104 Rogers 1993, 1405-06.

105 McLees 1990, 61-72; 195-211.

106 Hall 2014, 169.

107 Good and Tabraham 1981, 119, fig. 15.151; Curteis et al. 2012, 283.

108 Ritchie 2005, 146.

109 David Caldwell, pers. comm.

banquets at Tara.¹¹⁰ The plans and texts equate rank with particular cuts of meat; highest ranks would get both the best cuts and sit closest to the king. This was a strictly hierarchical arrangement, upheld to reflect a deeper cosmic order, which would stave off chaos. The pig carcass was seen to produce seven better cuts and seven poorer cuts. The former included the shank or *colpthae*, and those entitled to it included druids, vassal lords, pipers or flutists, and *fidscheallaig* – expert players of board games. Sayers suggests that status may have been accorded to these *fidcheall* players because of an association with the king.¹¹¹ This association may have entailed coaching the king, playing against him, and being expected to win on his behalf in other matches. They were co-ranked with musicians, whilst being higher in rank than a range of craftsmen (including goldsmiths), charioteers, royal stewards, physicians, cooks, storytellers, jugglers, jesters, and farters (*braigetóiri*). The late-sixteenth-century poetry of Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn includes a verse comparing Tara to the king's square on a *fidcheall* board.¹¹² This allegory recalls an eighth-century metaphor in the poetry of the Irish monk Blathmac, comparing God's layout of the stars in the heavens (with Christ as their king) to the layout of a *fidcheall* board, with Christ as the king piece.¹¹³ The role of the board-game players, the *fidscheallaig*, was marked enough to give rise to a surname in the West Cork area: 'Feehilly' or 'Fehilly', anglicised versions of Ó *Fithcheallaigh*, meaning 'chess-player'.¹¹⁴ This name starkly contrasts those used to denote dice-players or gamblers: *cearrach*, meaning 'dextrous player of games', 'gambler', 'dicer'. This term derives from *cearr* meaning 'wrong', 'awkward', 'unlucky', 'left or left-handed', and 'astray'.¹¹⁵ The Book of Leinster and the Book of Leccan deploy a very distinctive symbolism to define social status, suited to a Gaelic milieu but by no means unique, particularly concerning board games. Across medieval Europe, chess represented a key element in the depiction of social hierarchy and relative status. The most well-known and explicit of these depictions is

110 McCormick 2002, fig. 4; Sayers 1990.

111 Sayers 1990, 95-96.

112 *A Bhfuil Aguinn Dár Chum Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn*, 198-99.

113 *The Poems of Blathmac*, quatrain 192.

114 De Bhulbh 1997, 190-91. Originally, the name would have signified '*fidcheall* players', or more accurately, 'board-game players'.

115 Ibid.

Jacobus de Cessolis' *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium sive super ludo scachorum*, 'the book of the habits of people and the duties of nobles or about the game of chess', which equates social divisions to chess pieces. Thus, the king, queen, bishop, knight, and rook pieces represent the nobility, whilst the pawns designate eight categories of craftsmen, which were expected to show loyalty and not to exceed their station. These included untrustworthy types, which, like in the Irish evidence cited above, included gamblers.¹¹⁶

CONCLUSION

This brief tour of the evidence from Islay, as well as some of its neighbours in the Irish Sea/west coast cultural zone, has sought to demonstrate that the playing of board games was both prevalent and stratified throughout society. Present evidence demonstrates that board and dice games began to be manufactured, exchanged, acquired, played, and adapted in the Western Isles by the early first millennium AD. This phase represents one of the roots for the later flourishing of play in the Isles, which adds distinctive colour to the cultural hybridity that marks the early and late medieval centuries. Tracking game types and their development reveals a flux of entanglements and transformations that are pivotal to evolving cultural identities. The arrival of new peoples brought new games, often with similar roots – albeit grown in a different cultural soil – to those already played. Hence, Scandinavians arriving with *hnefatafl* would readily understand the *fidcheall* games being played by the indigenous dwellers of Pictish and Gaelic descent. Terminology for board games is fluid and generic, often carrying the broad meaning 'board-game': *fidcheall*, *tafl*, and *tables* all essentially designate a board for play. This is a flexible, functional terminology easily applied to a variety of games, in which names were not the sole determinants of the activity; the board, the pieces, the rules, and the players were all part of the equation that decided which game would be played. Thus, in later medieval texts (and presumably conversations), *fidcheall* and *tafl* were readily applicable as names or alternative names for new games, including chess. Specifics changed within broad cultural contexts, which meant identities could adapt and develop whilst not abandoning their roots; they could even develop a sense of rootedness,

116 Dalen-Oskam 2000, 67-68; Murray 1913, 537-558, 529-537.

helped by the permanence of play. Although the cultural and ethnic transitions that took place in the Isles between the ninth and fifteenth centuries were not determined by board games, board games were part of the Isles, an entangled network of sea, land, and people, as well as the objects they transported, abandoned, redefined, and preserved within that space.

All levels of society sought to play, but social elites staked out such play as their right and privilege, in part as an attempt to control freedom through access to free or leisure time. The combined evidence of historical sources and archaeology illuminates a long-lived tradition of gaming, particularly board games, available to all but particularly visible as an essential aspect of court and elite lifestyles in the west of Scotland. Placed in its European context, elite entitlement and ownership – in the face of widespread games play – proclaimed itself by the production of lavish boards and pieces, well beyond the pockets of all but royalty and nobility (and the later mercantile *nouveau riche*). Playing such games contributed to individual and group identities, often working in conjunction with other aspects of cultural behaviour, to create an identity that was partially identical yet partially competing with that of others. Recent work has shown that some of the deeper rhythms of late Iron Age life in the Western Isles, specifically the utilisation of human bone, continued during the new Scandinavian hegemony, and so it was with board games.¹¹⁷

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