

## 8. THE GAME OF MERELLES IN SCOTLAND

MERELLES is a widely known board game of ancient origin.<sup>3</sup> The earliest evidence of its existence is from the Temple of Karnak in the Nile Valley, and apparently the game was known in ancient Crete and Greece.

The game was introduced into England from France by the Normans in the eleventh century, and was known then as 'merels', a game with counters.<sup>4</sup> This word, however, suffered gradual distortion, until out of many generations of dialectal variations the term 'morris' became general in the fifteenth century. The distinctive titles, Nine, Six and Three men's morris were duly applied to the game as nine, six and three playmen were used, each number on its own type of board pattern (fig. 5).

The earliest documentary evidence of the game in Britain is a diagram of Nine men's morris in a thirteenth-century manuscript written at Cerne Abbey in Dorset and preserved at Trinity College, Cambridge. Incised designs, also of medieval date, intended for playing Three men's morris are to be found on seats in the cloisters of many English cathedrals.

Two examples of merelles boards are known in Scotland<sup>5</sup> and both appear to be of thirteenth-century date (fig. 6). The first board can be seen at Dryburgh Abbey in

<sup>1</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, LXXXVI (1951-2), 202 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Archaeological Journal*, cxv, 99 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Murray, H. J. R., *History of Board Games other than Chess*.

<sup>4</sup> Old French: merel - a counter.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Dr J. S. Richardson for information about their discovery.

Berwickshire; it is on the ruined wall of the N. aisle of the nave. The design has been scratched on the upper surface of a foundation stone, possibly by one of the stonemasons employed during the building operations in the thirteenth century. This board was uncovered about forty years ago when tracing the walls of the Abbey church. The other merelles board is roughly outlined on a detached stone now exhibited in the museum at

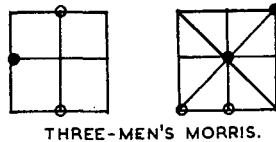
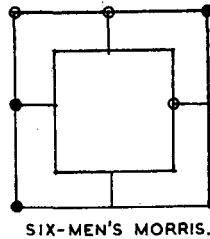
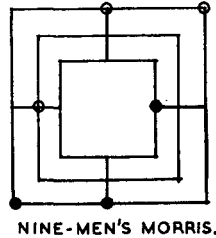


FIG. 5

Arbroath Abbey in Angus (Pl. XLIII, 2). It was found during the demolition of a post-Reformation wall in the Abbey which had been built with much older material. This example, like the Dryburgh board, is probably the handiwork of a medieval mason engaged for building work in the Abbey and used during rest periods.

The game is played by two players each using a set of nine, six or three counters of distinctive colour on one of the appropriate boards as illustrated (fig. 5). Nine men's morris with nine counters is a highly skilled game with countless moves and countermoves; there is also a recognised set of rules and terms. A shorter game can be played with six playmen on a less complicated board. Three men's morris is an even simpler version; it resembles the modern diversion known as 'noughts and crosses'. The aim of both players is to form a mill, that is a line of three men in a row. Every time a mill has been completed the successful player then removes one counter belonging to his opponent from the board. He may choose any counter other than one from a completed mill. In the opening game, the two opponents play alternately until all eighteen pieces are in play, the players then move each counter from point to point along the lines. The game proceeds until the loser is left with only two men and is now unable to create a mill.

The gaming boards from Dryburgh Abbey and Arbroath Abbey are of particular

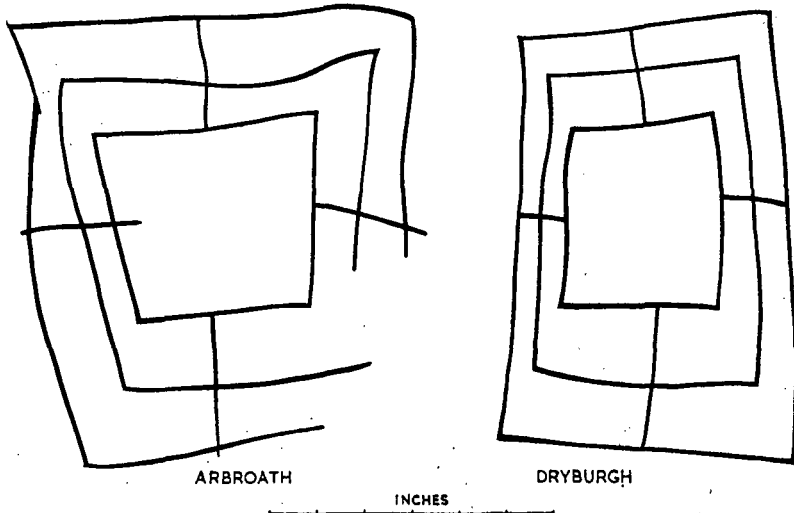


FIG. 6. Two merelles boards from Scotland

interest as they constitute the earliest and only material evidence known so far of merelles in Scotland.

W. NORMAN ROBERTSON



1. Carvings of Galician type representing deer at Ford, Mid Argyll



*Photo M.O.P.B. & W.*

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2. Building stone with incised merelles board from Arbroath Abbey

FEATHER: DEER CARVINGS *and* ROBERTSON: MERELLES IN SCOTLAND