

Ecclesia Ludens: board and dice games in a Scottish monastic context

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ABSTRACT

The 50th anniversary of the publication of The Games of Merelles in Scotland, by W Norman Robertson, in volume 98 of the Society's Proceedings is an appropriate moment to mark the development of medieval play studies in Scotland. His short note recognised the significance of the two merelles boards (from Arbroath and Dryburgh monasteries) but did not seek to contextualise their discovery in either of the broader contexts of board games or the church. The moment to do this is also made apposite by the significant increase in the evidence for board games and this paper briefly introduces the range of archaeological evidence accompanied by a discussion of the religious context of such play, in its European dimension and in particular around the endorsement/condemnation debate. The need to more fully understand the value of play as an aspect of identity in medieval society and social hierarchies is recognised in the medieval section of ScARF dealing with empowerment (<http://www.scottishheritagehub.com/content/55-playtime>) and this paper is also offered as a contribution to approaching that understanding.

INTRODUCTION

In 1966, W Norman Robertson published a short note in the pages of these *Proceedings* drawing attention to the game of merelles in Scottish medieval monasteries. Specifically, he put on record two boards, from the abbeys of Dryburgh and Arbroath (Robertson 1966: 321–3 and illus 1 this paper), as the first evidence of the game being played in Scotland. Fifty years later it is fitting that in the pages of the same *Proceedings* that we mark the explosion in examples of and the understanding of board games (both boards and pieces for merelles and other games) in Scottish medieval monasteries. His broad dating scheme for merelles, as a 12th-century introduction, still stands (despite the fact that the game was known to both Romans and Vikings and so we should not be surprised if pre-12th-century boards turn up in Scotland) though his tortuous explanation of the alternative name for merelles – morris – as resulting from dialectical transformations we need not retain: the names three, six and nine

men's morris need be no more than a metaphor for or an allusion to a folk dance. The focus of this paper remains the monastic context, but broadened out to treat the wider church context and also acknowledging that there is a wider context still, that of the whole of the society of medieval Scotland. Play in Scotland, as in the rest of medieval Europe, was endemic and found in every social context (Endrei & Zolnay 1986; Kluge-Pinsker 1991; Vale 2001; Hall 2011; 2012; 2014a; 2014b and 2016a; Sonntag 2013). The subject has significantly outgrown Robertson's very short note but this essay retains the spirit of his brevity. This is not the essay to discuss the rules, for which readers are referred to Murray 1952 and Parlett 1999.

BEYOND MERELS: BOARDS, PIECES, SITES

In 1966, Robertson reported on two boards, both for the game merelles (or merels, also known as morris and mill). There are now 23 ecclesiastical sites (monastic, parochial and proprietary) that

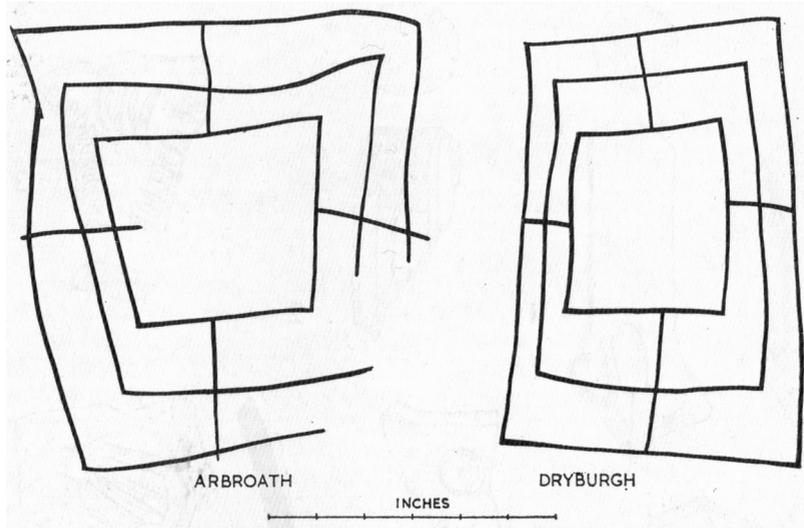
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TABLE 1
Gaming boards and playing pieces from Scottish churches c 700–c 1550

<i>Place</i>	<i>Church</i>	<i>Monastery</i>	<i>Nunery</i>	<i>Board and date</i>	<i>Playing piece / die and date</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Reference</i>
1. Arbroath, Angus		Tironensian		1 – merels 13–15th century			Robertson 1966: 322
2. Ballumbie, Angus	Parish			1 – alquerque 15th century			Unpublished, identification by M Hall
3. St Margaret's Inch, Forfar, Angus	Parish (chapel)				40 discs (most lost) for tables, 10–12th century		Stuart 1868, 140, pl XIII.3; Stuart 1874, 33
4. Iona, Argyll		Benedictine			1 – tables 13–14th century		Anon 1955, 202; Kluge-Pinsker 1991: 95, cat B 59; Mann 1977: 348; cat 213 Glenn 2003: 184
5. Inchmarnock, Bute, Argyll	Proprietary (from 12th century)	Benedictine		35 – merels, taf, daldos, hare-taf, alquerque 9–15th century	9 – merels/tables 9–12th century		Ritchie 2008: 116–27; Franklin 2008: 191–2; Hall 2014a: 168
6. Kilwinning, Ayrshire		Tironensian		15 – merels, daldos, alquerque 13–15th century			Hall forthcoming
7. Coldingham, Borders		Benedictine			1 – chess 11–12th century		Anon 1894: 51; Hall 2014a: 170
8. Dryburgh, Borders		Premonstratensian		1 – merels 13–14th century			Robertson 1966: 321–2
9. Hirsell, Borders	Parish			2 – merels, alquerque 12–13th century	1 12–13th century		Cramp 2014: 301–2

<i>Place</i>	<i>Church</i>	<i>Monastery</i>	<i>Nunnery</i>	<i>Board and date</i>	<i>Playing piece / die and date</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Reference</i>
10. Jedburgh, Borders		Augustinian		1 – merels 13–14th century	1 – die, for hazard etc. or with a board game 13–14th century		Gallagher 1995: 108–9, illus 87, cat 4; Caldwell 1995: 82, illus 77
11. Melrose, Borders		Cistercian		1 – chess (?) 13–14th century	1 – tables 13–14th century		Hall 2014a: 171, fig 5; Innis 1852: 297 Kluge-Pinsker 1991: 193, cat B.55
12. Dundrennan, Dumfries and Galloway		Cistercian			2 – tables/merels 13–14th century		Dunn 2001: 47, cat. 42–3, illus 38
13. Glenluce, Dumfries and Galloway		Cistercian		1 – chess (?) 13–14th century		2 – ceramic tiles with cell grids 13–14th century	Cruden 1952: figs 16, 18, stone board unpublished
14. Whithorn, Dumfries and Galloway	Cathedral, Priory and Minster	Benedictine and Premonstratensian		4 – merels, tafl (and 2 possible fragments) 12–13th century	19 – hnefatafl, merels, tables 9–13th century		Nicholson 1997a: 447–9, 462; Nicholson 1997b: 487; Nicholson 1997c: 499; Nicholson 1997d: 509
15. Portmahomack, Easter Ross		Benedictine (Columban)		1 – tafl (?) 9th century			Hall 2016b: D115
16. Dunfermline, Fife		Benedictine			2 – tables/merels 15th century		Cox 1996: 101–2
17. St Andrews, Fife	Cathedral	Augustinian			1 – tables 10–12th century		Hay Fleming 1909: 412; 1931: 197–8, fig 15
18. Kirkwall, Orkney	Cathedral and Bishop's Palace			1 – merels (Cathedral) 13–14th century	1 – tables (Bishop's Palace) 13–14th century	Bench end (Arma Christi dice) (Cathedral) 14–16th century	Thomson 2002; Hall 2014a; Mann 1977: Nr. 22; Anon 1955: 203; Glenn 2003: 182–3

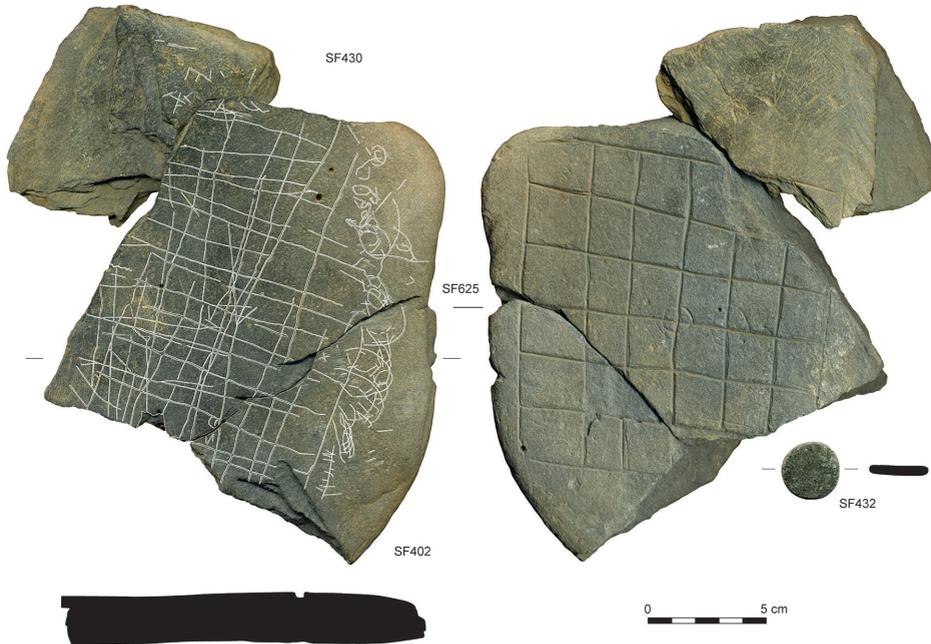
<i>Place</i>	<i>Church</i>	<i>Monastery</i>	<i>Nunnery</i>	<i>Board and date</i>	<i>Playing piece / die and date</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Reference</i>
19. Elcho, Perthshire			Cistercian		1 – die for hazard etc or with a boardgame. 14–16th century		Reid 1988: 75
20. Perth, Perthshire		Carmelite			3 – tables/merels 14–15th century		Stones 1989: 9.6.2mf, 9.6.4mf
21. Perth, Perthshire		Dominican			1 – tables/merels 13–15th century		Not published but in PMAG collections
22. Paisley, Renfrewshire		Cluniac		4 (5?) – chess, hare-tafl, alquerque 13–15th century	12 – tables/merels 1 – die, for hazard or with a board game 13–15th century	8	Malden 2000 and unpublished (but recorded M Hall)
23. St Ninian's Isle, Shetland	Church (monastic?)				4 – tables/merels 7–9th century		Barrowman 2012: 62, 126, 92–3, 197–8



ILLUS 1 The Dryburgh and Arbroath abbeys merels boards as drawn for Robertson's note in PSAS for 1966

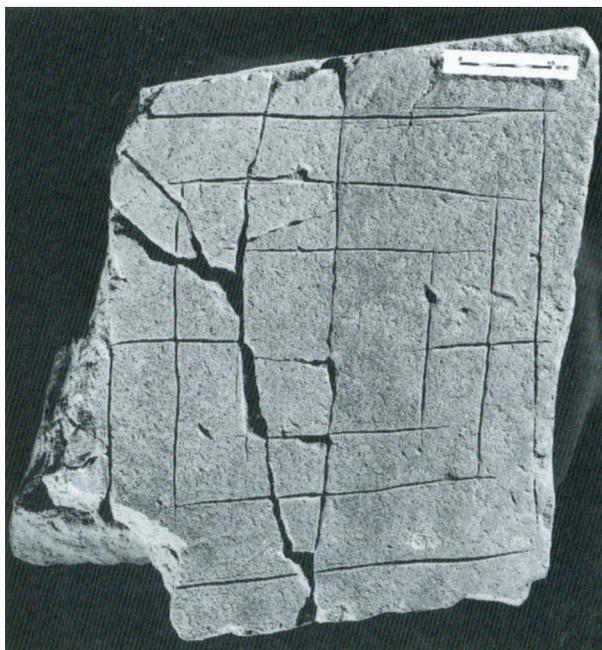
have produced evidence for medieval board games. The current total for all gaming boards is a certain 68 (possibly 69), of which 22 are for merels (see Table for full breakdown by site). All

of these boards are made of stone, the majority of slate, and they include fragments of hitherto unrecognised examples of the games alquerque or fox and geese and its variants (Murray 1952: 65–



ILLUS 2 Table boards and a playing piece from Inchmarnock Abbey

71; Parlett 1999: 187–93), *daldos* (Michaelsen 2001) and *hare-tavl* (Michaelsen 2014). These significant new additions to the record include an alquerque board from Ballumbie Parish Church, Angus. The site was discovered and fully excavated in 2005 in advance of a housing development. The church originated as the chapel of Lundie but became a parish church in 1470. Underlying the church was a previously unknown long cist cemetery (Hall & Cachart 2005). The



ILLUS 3 Merels board from Jedburgh Abbey

site remains unpublished and the alquerque board survives as two fragments (a third of the board in total) re-used as floor make-up in the mid-16th century (Hall unpublished note). In addition to the boards, there are 99 known playing pieces (including four dice), though almost half of them (40 bone tablesmen from St Margaret's Inch, Forfar) were lost shortly after discovery in the 19th century.

The largest concentration of boards comprises the 35 or so from the early Christian monastery on Inchmarnock, off Bute (Ritchie 2008: 116–27). These are all stone (mainly slate) incised graffiti boards (illus 2).

The games represented include *hnefatafl/fidcheall* (Scandinavian and Irish versions of essentially the same game derived from a Roman progenitor), nine men's morris, alquerque and *daldos*. The majority are pre-11th century, but there are also a few later medieval examples. With each grouping, early and late, the boards were part of a wider range of graffiti slates, including examples with inscriptions and lettering, taken as indications of a teaching function, with which

the gaming boards would be consistent. There are several simple stone playing discs from Inchmarnock, including examples that were clearly used on the graffiti boards. An unfinished board from the monastery at Portmahomack, Tarbat, is the sole indicator of gaming activity at the site (Hall 2016b). The surviving design suggests the early stages of either a chessboard or a *tafl/fidcheall* board; it appears to date to the 8th century – coming from a context overlying the burning horizon associated with the destruction of the 8th-century monastery. Such a date makes a chess board impossible and so an unfinished *tafl/fidcheall* board is not unlikely.

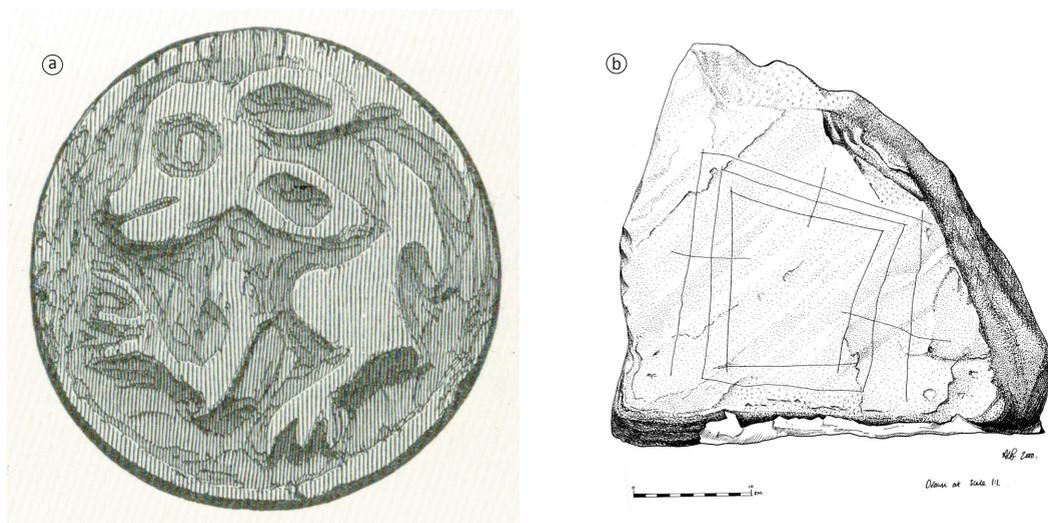
Except for the Kilwinning Abbey and the Whithorn assemblages, the remaining boards are all single examples from later medieval monastic sites, mainly in the Lowlands. At Jedburgh Abbey, the *merelles* board (found broken, illus 3) and an ivory dice both came from Room 6, an undercroft adjacent to the Reredorter in the East range, which was built in the mid-13th century and re-configured in the 14th century. The dice was found in midden deposits and the board within the core of the west wall. This may suggest their use in the early-to-mid-13th century, either by the monks or masons involved in construction work. The presence of dice is not needed to suggest gambling pursuits. At Whithorn Minster, the later phase of the church included coins, gaming pieces and food debris, suggestive of gambling activity (Hill 1997: 354). The boards from Whithorn, later Cathedral and Premonstratensian Priory, comprise four boards on three stones, a pair of

merels boards on one stone, a single merels board on another stone and a tafl board on the third stone (Nicholson 1997a: 449). Stratigraphically, the merels boards date to the 11th–13th century and towards the end of that phase, which is consistent with merels as a 12th-century or later game in Britain. Tafl is conventionally seen as an early medieval board game but the Whithorn board dates stratigraphically to 1250–1600, though the excavators suggest it may have been displaced from an earlier context in the graveyard (Nicholson 1997a: 449). This need not be the case as the game was still being played in the 14th century, albeit it had been superseded in popularity by chess. It is paralleled by a stratigraphically 12th-century example from Downpatrick Cathedral, Northern Ireland (Hall 2001b). A group of small discs from the excavations at Whithorn are interpreted as gaming discs. Eight of them are dated to the same period as the merels boards already discussed – seven of them (including one marked with a cross) are size-compatible for use on those boards and were found in the inner part of the inner precinct (Nicholson 1997a: 447–78). From the same date, 1000 x 1050–1250, comes a conical stone piece which could be a tafl king

piece (Nicholson 1997a: 462), but equally could be a pawn. Earlier in date (9th–11th century for their manufacture in the monastery’s workshop) is a group of seven antler gaming pieces, found in a range of contexts into the 13th century (Nicholson 1997b: 47).

A small assemblage of 12 incised, graffiti-bearing slates (including inscriptions) was recovered during the recent excavations at the Tironensian abbey of Kilwinning. The general character of the assemblage suggests the re-using of broken slates, largely used as roofing slates – the slates are broken fragments consistent with working debitage or of pieces lost from the roofs. Ten of the 12 slate fragments carry clear traces of 15 certain and possible gaming boards. Three games appear to be represented, alquerque, daldos and merels. They are poorly contextualised but clearly associated with the cloisters and the chapter house of the abbey (Hall forthcoming) and parallel the tone of the assemblage from Inchmarnock.

In his note, Robertson suggested a context of masons activity for the boards from Arbroath and Dryburgh (mostly from a lack of clear medieval context – whilst the latter example was clearly



ILLUS 4 Church play in Kirkwall, Orkney: 2a: Tablesman from the Bishop’s Palace, Kirkwall as drawn for PSAS 8 (1871), 2b: Merels board found in the precinct wall, Kirkwall Cathedral, reproduced by permission of the New Orkney Antiquarian

not visible during the medieval period, being part of the lower course of a wall, it also remains possible that the board was added during post-Reformation stone-robbing). The board from Melrose is without doubt the work of masons – it was clearly incised on a block of stone before it was cut to shape as a vault-rib of the 14th–15th century. The board could have lain around on an unused block of stone for several years and, though now reduced in size, was clearly a large gridded one of cells, suitable for a chess variation.

In 2001, a nine men's morris/merels board (illus 4b) was found built into the boundary wall (opposite the Bishop's Palace) of St Magnus's Cathedral, Kirkwall, it was in the Bishop's Palace that in the 19th century a bone tablesman was found, bearing the design of a rabbit (illus 4a). The Cluniac Abbey of Paisley is well-known today for its magnificent Great Drain, a rich source of archaeological finds in recent years (Malden 2000), including four incised slate gaming boards for alquerque/hare-tavl and chess, along with a dozen stone gaming counters, bone playing pieces and a bone dice, currently being prepared for publication and in the collections of Paisley Museum. At Glenluce Abbey, the stone board of 4 × 4 cells is poorly provenanced and not formally reported in Cruden's accounts (1951 and 1952) of the clearance excavations carried out in the late 1940s. The abbey also boasts the fragments of two plain ceramic floor tiles, which Cruden (1952: figs 16 & 18) reconstructed as chequer-board designs of 7 × 10 and 6 × 6 cells respectively; they are crudely incised by hand rather than stamped and appear to represent game board designs. This variation in board size is typical of the range found depicted for chessboards in medieval manuscript art and on lead badges (Hall 2001a).

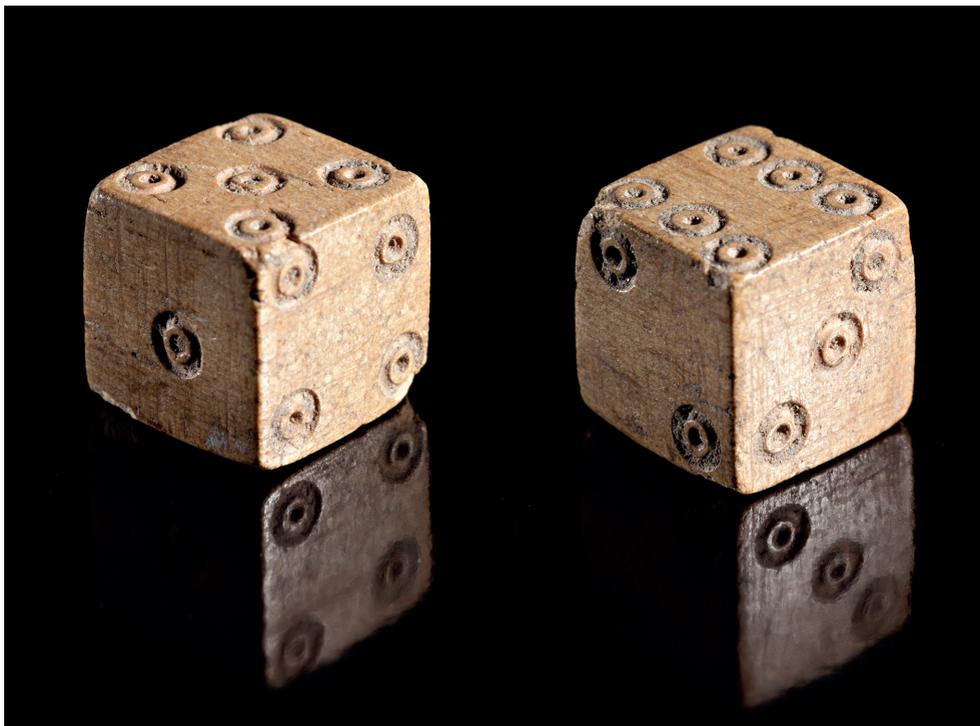
At several sites, to date no boards have been found, but playing pieces and dice have. Three slate and one cross-marked lead counters from the Carmelite friary, Perth, were found associated with the church building (Stones 1989: 99–110 and microfiche 9.6.2 and 9.6.4). At the Cathedral and Augustinian Priory of St Andrews, a single, bone tablesman was found in 1860, amongst the long cists of Hallowhill, close to St Mary's Chapel. Both sides are decorated with a broad strap interlace. It could be 11th–

12th-century in date. It is comparable to the now lost group of such tablesmen found at the church site of St Mary's Inch, Forfar (Hall 2007: 23–4). An abstract ivory chess piece of probably 11th–12th-century date found in the 19th century in Coldingham graveyard (illus 5) was almost certainly associated with Coldingham Priory (on the site of an earlier Northumbrian nunnery). Also casually found, at Iona Abbey, was a fine bone tablesman bearing a mermaid motif. It was recovered in the 1950s during floor clearance of a room north of the chapter house (Anon 1955; Kluge-Pinsker 1991: 195). Both are high status pieces.

At Dunfermline Abbey, the 15th-century ceramic gaming pieces could relate to both the brief extension of the monastic cemetery and the first phase of the abbot's lodgings, though the pieces do not suggest high status users and so were probably not connected with the abbot or his guests but perhaps his staff. The single die from the Cistercian nunnery, Elcho Priory, near Perth (illus 6), may reflect high status visitors. Found during the excavations in the 1960s/1970s, it was poorly recorded but probably associated with the late phase of the church in the 15th century (Reid & Lye 1988: 75). Although Elcho was a modest



ILLUS 5 Abstract chess piece from Coldingham Priory.
© National Museums Scotland



ILLUS 6 Die from Elcho Nunnery, near Perth, Perthshire. © Perth Museum and Art Gallery

house, it was associated with some powerful women, including the Lady Margaret, sister of James III, who retired there after 1489 on an allowance of 100 merks (c£66) (Stavert 1988: 51). Such guests would no doubt have expected to play at games as they had at court. We know from the wider European context that nunneries and ideas around gaming were not alien. The abstract floor pattern of the 15th-century convent at Heukelum, Utrecht, includes several gaming board designs (including merels).

The earliest certain pieces are the boards and pieces from the early medieval monasteries of Inchmarnock and Portmahomack. This proven early medieval context for such material culture encourages the inclusion here (Table 1, no 23) of the gaming pieces from St Ninian's Isle, Shetland, recovered from midden deposits. The report describes them as Late Iron Age and typically so, but Late Iron Age can equate to early medieval and the uncertainties around the date of the earliest church mean that a 7th–8th-century

overlap between the church and the use of the gaming pieces cannot be ruled out (Barrowman 2012: 197–8).

DISCUSSION: HOLY PLAY AND THE THREAT OF GAMBLING

As the accompanying table shows, the monastic establishments where archaeological evidence of the material culture of gaming has been found in Scotland to date does not include (with one exception) any of the Mendicant orders. The spread of these orders from the 13th century onwards reached every part of Europe. From the 15th century onwards, the Franciscan and Dominican orders in particular led the way in condemning games or rather gambling on games, which was endemic (Paton 1992: 307–36). One of the misericords in the abbey church of Montbenoit (Doubs, France) has plausibly been interpreted as a depiction and reminder of the censure of monkish play (Bethmont-Gallerand 2001: 183)

and perhaps not being drawn into the activities of guests staying in the monasteries. It shows a monk with a chessboard with a suspension hook (a type known from depictions of courtly feasts in medieval paintings), dice and a racquet. The abbey of St Bertin in St Omer had a tennis court – in 1314 Robert of Artois was reimbursed for his losses playing there. The Beguinage in Bruges had a tennis court recorded in early 17th-century engravings and the Dominican friary in Perth had a tennis court as part of its royal lodgings. This misericord in particular, because of its combination of monk with gaming kit can also be seen as a depiction of the reality of monkish play habits. The anti-gaming line within church preaching reached back to the 4th century and the sermons of John Chrysostom and the pseudo-Cyprian – who linked gambling to the devil, who was seen to preside over gaming tables and use dice as a snare (Depaulis 2013: 120). The later medieval condemnation was led by Franciscan Bernard of Sienna, whose preaching career began around 1420, targeted against what he saw as the three evils of gambling, usury and sodomy. The sermons were violent in tone and encouragement and invariably concluded with large bonfires of gaming equipment – boards, pieces, dice and playing cards – as well as the vanities of a woman’s toilet (Paton 1992; Depaulis 2013: 120). Bernard’s preaching was confined to northern Italy but his Franciscan followers (including the prolific traveller John De Capestrano) and successors and Dominican preachers conducted sermon tours across northern Europe. The preaching tour of Richard the Franciscan, for example, included a visit to Paris in 1429 and the audience responded as prompted and burnt their gaming paraphernalia and toiletries (Gertsman 2010: 3; Depaulis 2013: 125–6). The target was gambling, but this allowed its consequences and allies – luxuria, greed, drunkenness and lust – to also be targeted, with bonfires generally taking place in front of churches. In the late 15th century, the Dominican’s leading firebrand was Savonarola who preached in Florence (earning the condemnation of the Pope). He intensified the fusion of politics and piety by staging his bonfires in front of the centre of civic government in Florence, the Piazza della Signoria: on one

occasion, a huge pyre with 15 shelves on each side was built and, as recorded by Pseudo-Burlamacchi, it was heaped with ‘all the accursed stuff of Carnival’, including paintings, gaming boards, playing cards, dice, harps, lutes, zithers, cymbals, hairpieces, diadems, masks, perfumes, ‘ivory chessmen worth 40 ducats and others of alabaster and porphyry worth even more’ (Weinstein 2011: 218). These were sporadic, if violent, outbursts of theological and moral zeal that appear to have had no long-term effect on play either within or without the cloisters. The Dutch proverb, ‘where the abbot carries dice, the monks will gamble’ remained apposite beyond the 15th century (Hall 2009).

The seeming absence of gaming kit from Scottish mendicant houses would seem to support this picture but it is not quite so straightforward. The assassination of King James I in 1437, at the Dominican or Blackfriars monastery in Perth, reveals that there was a tennis court there (seemingly James had a monastic drain blocked to avoid further losses of tennis balls) though we have no evidence to suggest that the friars actually indulged in the game. On the evening of his assassination, exchequer records reveal that James and his court entertained themselves with chess, tables, cards, etc played for money. This is likely to have been a royal, court privilege within the royal guesthouse. Only small-scale excavation campaigns have explored the friary location and those in 1983 (Bowler & Hall 1995) recovered a small slate gaming counter, not published in the final report, but now in the collections of Perth Museum and Art Gallery. It comes from the southern end of the site, in the vicinity of the cemetery and well away from the royal guest lodgings. The counter reflects lower status gaming pursuits, possibly by the friars or in interaction with townsfolk. That gaming practices penetrated the inner core of the Mendicant friaries is ably demonstrated by the material from the Franciscan or Greyfriars convent in Carmarthen, Wales, discussed below.

The presence of gaming kit in a range of other Scottish monastic and church establishments tells us that the Mendicant view was part of a spectrum of views and responses. In the second quarter of the 15th century, Walter Bower was

Abbot of Inchcolm Abbey (a house of regular Augustinian canons), where he wrote his chronicle *Scotichronicon*. He was not above using chess to make a literary allusion (*Chron Bower* viii: 205), but was disparaging about dice and chance games because of their unfortunate consequences (*Chron Bower* viii: 255), where he wraps up a condemnation of gambling and blasphemy in his story about the siege of Chateauroux (Hall 2011: 160). There seems to have been an organisational as well as personal need for such play. Recent work on the contemporary context of organisations has identified play as working in three critical ways in the work place: as a contribution to work, as an intervention into work and as a usurpation of work (Sørensen & Spoelstra 2011). Regarding monasticism as part of the humanly worked out ‘work of God’ allows us to see something like these roles for play within social organisations in the Middle Ages. The wider context to these organisational roles that sees play as useful and beneficial, from one perspective, or as a dysfunctional distraction that cuts productivity is as prevalent today in a capitalist, industrial context (Sørensen & Spoelstra 2011: 83) as it was in the medieval period in the context of theology and morality.

All that remains of the cloister of the Benedictine abbey of Notre Dame la Daurade, Toulouse, is a series of early 12th-century capitals housed in the museum that replaced the demolished abbey in the 19th century. One of the capitals shows a sequence depicting the Transfiguration, from *The Gospel of Matthew* 17, on three faces and labelled with the word TRANSFIGURATIONIS, the theme completed with Doubting Thomas on the fourth face. Camille (1996: 52–61) has analysed this and contrasted it with a frieze of ludic activities (dancing, wrestling, musicians and board games) running around the abacus that tops the capital. The two schemes juxtapose the secular pleasures outside the cloister with the sacred dramas of the cloister. However, there is no guarantee that the pairing of capital and abacus is how it was in the medieval period – the re-joining of capitals and abaci took place in the Museum post demolition (McNeill 2006: 19) and the transformation theme, if we allow it to hold, could not be about

the opposition of sacred and secular but about their unity under God. Camille implies a rather reserved environment in the cloister but a range of tasks were permitted there – the range and degree varying from order to order, but included bookbinding, reading, conversation, washing, laundry and shaving, along with those daily rhythms of liturgical processes and the accessing of chapter houses, refectories and dormitories (McNeill 2006: 13–14). They were, in monastic terms, lively spaces, and they were also where board games were played (Hall 2009: 2012).

The German monk Caesarius (c 1180–c 1240) was Prior of the Cistercian Heisterbach Abbey, south-east of Bonn. He collected nearly 750 ghost stories together as the *Dialogus Miraculorum*, all written as dialogues between a monk and a novice. One of them (Book XI, Chap LXIV and quoted in Joynes 2001: 49) tells of an apparition that at twilight crossed the cloister at Heisterbach, where the scholars were playing, to reach the canons’ cemetery. The cloister probably gave the best combination of shelter and light in a monastic setting and so was invariably the place where board games were played, as the survival of incised board games on the benches of many abbeys and cathedrals testify (Hall 2012).

Boards are also found in other areas of the monastery where it seems unequivocal that they were used by monks. From Greyfriars Priory, Carmarthen, there are two double-sided slate-incised boards, one was excavated from the area of the choirstalls and the other from the infirmary midden (Brennan 2001). One of the boards is unfinished, but the other three are for alquerque or fox and geese and daldos. The New Year ‘Feast of Fools’ permitted dicing and gaming (sometimes on the main altar of the church), a context of indulgence that may also have influenced depictions of gaming on misericords etc. That board and dice games would be played regardless of Church disapproval or approval is more than confirmed by the French comic tale of ‘St Peter and the Minstrel’, which conscripts the near-ultimate sanction of St Peter for playing with dice. In summary, the tale tells how the devils leave hell to go and harvest more souls and they leave in charge a recently arrived scoundrel minstrel and inveterate gambler. Aware of this, St

Peter pops downstairs to visit the minstrel, armed with a gaming board and three dice (probably the game hazard). St Peter offers the minstrel a chance to win a stack of money but if he loses he must give Peter all the souls in hell. Peter, of course, wins and all the souls are allowed into heaven. The devils return and are so furious with the minstrel they throw him out of hell and so he is allowed into heaven. The tale concludes: ‘Now cheer up all you minstrels, rogues, lechers and gamblers for the one who lost these souls at dice has set you all free’ (Brewer 2008: 20–6, quote at 26; see also Levy 2000: 85–8). A true piece of satire, a play on play, on getting into heaven and out of hell, on fighting fire with fire and on topsy-turvying bad into good.

In the medieval period, both John of Salisbury and Thomas Aquinas argued in favour of the restorative value of play (without specifically mentioning board games). Much earlier, Isidore of Seville saved his condemnation of play not for board games (on which he was neutral, giving an account of their origins and metaphorical allusions in his *Etymologies* XVIII: lx–lxxviii) but for other forms of play, especially the Circus, which he derides as a work of human vice and demons. Theologians today still make a beneficial link with play, including John Hughes, who has observed that ‘God’s work cannot be contrasted with play for its very gratuity and immediate delight is best understood as a form of play’ (Sørensen & Spoelstra 2011: 84). The ultimate source for the modern and the medieval theological outlook is Biblical authority – *Proverbs*, for example, portrays play as an essential element of God’s creation. Wisdom in particular is characterised as a child playing with God’s creation (eg *Proverbs* 8: 22–31; Brown 2010). But it is also the Bible that links play to futility and idolatry (*Wisdom* 15: 10–12 describes idolaters as treating life as a game). Such was drawn on by the various preaching friars already mentioned, and by the likes of Ulrich of Zell (1029–93), a Cluniac reformer closely associated with both Cluny and Regensburg. He established a religious community in Regensburg before joining Cluny in 1061, under the abbacy of St Hugh. In 1087 he founded the monastery of Zell, in the Black Forest, and a Cluniac nunnery followed in 1090,

just a mile from Zell (at Bolesweiler). Between 1079–87 he wrote the three volume work, *Uses of Cluny* (*Consuetudines cluniacenses*) dealing with the education of novices, the liturgy and the administration of monasteries (commissioned by the Benedictine abbot and reformer William of Hirsau (c 1030–1091)). It may be his influence that can be seen in some formal aspects of church decoration, for he taught that worldly games should be renounced if an oblate was to become a monk (McNeill 2006: 18–19).

CONCLUSION

From individual Scottish monastic sites, the evidence for board and dice games is often slight but taken in aggregate it is significant in its extent and variety – the majority of orders clearly tolerated or endorsed the playing of these games by their communities (monks, nuns, friars and lay-members). Viewed against the backdrop of the wider European evidence we can see something of the complicated nature of human behaviour: the institution of the church did not express a single view so much as a series of contested views. Practices around gaming fed into a general concern with maintaining society and controlling its misbehaviours – and a specific concern with aristocratic behaviour. There were two basic strategies for dealing with this, with fluctuations between them: an endorsement of gaming and its metaphorical absorption into church practice (and in part due to the aristocratic background of many prelates) and a reforming zeal which condemned all gaming practice as immoral and needing to be purged. The unstoppable desire to play fed into the cult of saints at all levels of society and influenced the tone of pilgrimage and devotion – the saints, like Christ, had to be human so that believers could see the hope of salvation; they had to play games. The church on earth shared a socially widespread pursuit that extended well beyond the monastic cloisters.

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