A GAME ON THE EDGE: AN ATTEMPT TO UNRAVEL THE GORDIAN KNOT OF *TAFL* GAMES

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Tafl games can be said to exist “on the edge” in at least two ways. First, geographically: *tafl* games, in their various forms, are located on the north western edge of the European continent, spread by cultural transmission in the Viking era; second, in terms of comprehension, they are on the edge of our understanding due to a longstanding confusion about the rules, and discussion of how to achieve or restore game balance in *tafl* games is a mainstay of ludological literature, due in part to misunderstandings arising from an entry in the journal of the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus. Some scholars have suggested the game known in Wales as *tawlbwrdd* (literally, “throw-board”) was played with dice. Another facet of the *tafl* family lacking clarity is the English game *alea evagelii*, which is known from a textual reference in an Irish gospel, but the game is not attested in the archaeological record. This paper will explore these matters, along with related aspects of games the *tafl* group, and will seek to clarify what is known and what is not. Let us begin, however, with a definition of *tafl* games, followed by a review of the distribution of the various games in the *tafl* family, in order to set out the scope of this examination.

***Tafl* games**

Tafl games are characterised by the asymmetric ratio (2:1) of attacking to defending pieces. Typically, the defending player’s pieces are arranged in a defensive cluster around a king piece placed at the centre of a square board (Fig. 1). The attacking player has twice as many pieces as the defending player; the attacking pieces are arranged in groups on each of the four sides of the board. There is variance in the size of the board, and in the number

of pieces, which has some association with the game's geographical location. These variants will be discussed further below, after some consideration of nomenclature.

Figure 1: Tablut board with pieces arranged for play. Graphic: Wilhelm Meis (2008).

Nomenclature

Martha Bayless offers a detailed discussion of the Old English terms used to describe board games, explaining that *tæfl*, like the Latin *alea*, was a generic term that can refer to a die, to a game played with dice, or to any game of chance (Bayless 2005, pp. 10–13).

Some consideration of the usage of the Latin *alea* is useful to understand similar usage for the Old English *taefl*. The Roman historian Tacitus used the term *alea* to refer to dice games played by Germanic tribes in the first century of the current era. “Gaming”, writes Susan M. Youngs in her account of the confused excavation record of the Sutton Hoo game pieces, “was a preoccupation of the Germanic tribes noted by Tacitus at the end of the first century” (Youngs 1983, p. 861):

Aleam, quod mirerer, sobrii inter seria exer cent, tanta lucrandi perdendive temeritate, ut, cum imnia defecerunt, extremo ac novissimo iactu de libertate ac de corpore contendant. [Strange to say, they play games of hazard when they are sober, and make them one of their serious pursuits; and such is their blind passion for winning or losing that when everything else has failed they stake, on a last decisive throw, personal freedom and even life itself.] (Tacitus, Germania XXIV in Youngs 1983, pp. 861–862).

Youngs cites Stout’s 1909 translation of Tacitus which uses “games of hazard” to gloss “*aleam*”. However, “hazard” may be a loaded term as it is also the name of a rather notorious dice game, to which there are several references in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (e. g. the Prologue to The Man of Law’s Tale). Bayless shows “*alea*” to be an elastic term which, as well as being a general term for a game of chance or a game played with dice, also refers to a specific Roman game, *tabula*, derived from *duodecim scripta*, as is evident in the e. C4th call for abstention from gambling in Canon 79 of the Synod of Elvira, cited by Harold Murray: “*Si quis fidelis aleam, id est tabulam, luserit nummis, placuit eum abstinere*” (Murray 1952, pp. 31–32).¹ This imperative to abstain, which helpfully offers some clarification as to its specific meaning in this usage of *alea*, is translated by Bayless as: “if anyone plays *alea*, that is, *tabula*, for money, he should refrain” (Bayless 2005, p. 11). Isidore of Seville also clarified the same specific usage of *alea* to mean *tabula* in the C7th when referring to *alea* in his *Etymologiae*: “*DE TABVLA. Alea, id est*

¹ I am grateful to Thierry Depaulis for directing my attention to the online text of the Canons of the Synod of Elvira via the website Early Church Texts: <https://earlychurchtexts.com/main/elvira/canons_of_elvira_01.shtml>. Date of Access: January 2020. I am also grateful for his suggested corrections to some of the Latin in this paper.

lusus tabulae, inventa a Graecis in otio Troiani belli a quodam milite Alea nomine, a quo et ars nomen accepit. Tabula luditur pyrgo, calculis tesserisque.” [Alea, that is the game of *Tabula*, invented by the Greeks in the slow periods of the Trojan war by a certain soldier named Alea, from the which the activity also took its name. *Tabula* is played with a *pyrgus*, counters and dice]” (Bayless 2005, p. 11).

Bayless offers other examples of the use of *alea* for the game *tabula* from the ninth and tenth centuries, while also problematising Murray’s idea that Suetonius’s well-known C1st reference to the Emperor Claudius’s fondness for *alea*, which apparently led to him having a board (*alveus*) fixed to his carriage so he could play whilst travelling, by suggesting that rather than unambiguously meaning Claudius played *alea* in the sense of “*alea, id est tabula*”, Suetonius could equally have meant that Claudius used an *alveus* in the sense of a hollowed tray, as a surface for casting dice (Bayless 2005, p. 10).

Discussing the game *tafl*, Bayless notes the game, popular in C9th and C10th Scandinavia (attested in the archaeological record, with finds in, for e.g., C8–10th Birka, in Sweden, and the C9th Gokstad ship burial, in Norway).²

[W]as originally *tafl*, borrowed from *tabula* (most likely in its meaning of ‘board-game’ rather than *alea i.e. tabula*). To distinguish it from other board-games, *tafl* later acquired the name *hnefatafl*, or ‘the board-game of the fist’, the fist signifying the king-piece. In Anglo-Saxon England it was known as *tæfl* [...] however [...] the name *tæfl* is more problematic than it would at first appear” (Bayless 2005, p. 13).

The Old English *tæfl* is problematic because, Bayless argues, the Anglo-Saxons used this word, and the Latin *tabula*, to refer to as many as seven different board-games: 1. the game derived from *duodecim scripta* (*alea, i. e. tabula*); 2. *duodecim scripta* itself; 3. *hnefatafl*; 4. *latrunculi*; 5. an unidentified asymmetric game played with one die; 6. a game of equal forces played with one die; and 7. a game played with two dice, as well as dice games played

² See Whittaker 2006, *passim*, for discussion of the former; Helmfrid 2005, p. 12 for discussion of the latter.

without a board and pieces (Bayless 2005, p. 19). While the existence and/or identity of the unknown game Bayless alludes to in sense 5 may be moot, that is essentially beside the point as she goes on to explain: “the modern practice of terming the 2:1 game *tæfl*, as has been the case in modern scholarship and popular usage, does not accurately reflect Anglo-Saxon practice. In Old English, *tæfl* could mean *hnefatafl*; or *alea* i.e. *tabula*; or, undoubtedly, other board-games; or it could mean a ‘die’” (Bayless 2005, p. 20).

Having established the nomenclature related to games in the *tafl* family is potentially problematic, although precision is possible with a specific term such as “*hnefatafl*”, or with clarification as in “*alea, id est tabula*”, the terrain is still more fraught than it might otherwise be. This is due to the prevalence in more recent discussion of the imprecise usage of the terms “draughts” and “chess”, as shown, for example, in the correspondence between Edward Falkener and Samuel Birch (1813–1885) Egyptologist, and Keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum (see Falkener 1961, pp. 9–35). More recently, the broadcaster and historian Michael Wood has referred to “a chess set” amongst the Sutton Hoo artefacts (Wood 2005, p. 67) whilst parenthetically assuring readers, “chess was a very popular Viking game” (Wood 2005, pp. 174–175). David Parlett notes imprecision in translation, with “many [...] references [to *tafl* ...] disguised in translation by being referred to as chess” (Parlett 1999, p. 201). Claude Sterckx also notes confusion arising from the use of *fidchell* and *gwyddbwyll* [these terms are discussed in more detail below] to refer to chess (Sterckx 1970, p. 599). We can turn our attention now to a consideration of the distribution of the game in its variant forms.

According to Bayless, “[a]rchaeological evidence suggests that in the early mediaeval period, *hnefatafl* surpassed *alea* i.e. *tabula* in popularity. The game followed the course of the Vikings, spreading to England, Ireland, Wales and Scotland” (Bayless 2005, p. 14).

Distribution: Scotland and Ireland

The smallest of the game boards in the *tafl* family is the 7 x 7 type attested in the archaeological record by finds in Ireland (e. g. the Ballinderry game-

board; the Waterford game board; the lost board of Knockanboy)³ and in Scotland (e. g. the Buckquoy graffiti boards, Orkney; the Birsay board, Orkney; the boards from Inchmarnock, Bute; and Jarlshof, Shetland).⁴

The former are peg-boards, with 49 holes in a 7 x 7 grid to take pieces in the form of pegs. The Ballinderry game board (National Museum of Ireland, Inv. No. NMI 1932: 6533) is made of yew, and dated to the C10th. The edge of the board is decorated with a carved interlace pattern; two carved handles, each in the form of a human head, protrude from opposite sides of the board (Fig. 2). The Waterford game board (Waterford Museum of Treasures, Inv. No. 1999.32) is in two oak fragments, dated to c. 1150. It resembles the Ballinderry board, in that it is evident that it was a 7 x 7 peg board, although the remaining handle is plain rather than figural, and the edge of the board lacks elaborate interlace decoration. The lost board of Knockanboy, Co. Antrim, a large wood fragment of a peg board, including one handle, decorated with a petal motif, was retrieved from a bog in 1837. The board is described as “lost” by Bayless (2015, p. 14). Simpson offers a description and reproduces a drawing of 1838 which he describes as “hurried” and executed with “carelessness” in its delineation of the board as 7 x 8 rather than 7 x 7 (Simpson 1972, pp. 63–64).

The latter are stone boards in the form of 6 x 6 grids, which provide 49 intersections for pieces to engage in the same way as the 7 x 7 peg boards.

³ Ballinderry gaming board: National Museum of Ireland. Inv. No. NMI 1932: 6533. Available online: <<https://www.museum.ie/Archaeology/Exhibitions/Current-Exhibitions/Viking-Ireland/The-Ballinderry-gaming-board>>. Date of Access: January 2020. See also: Hencken et al (1935–1937); Johnson (1999).

Waterford gaming board: Waterford Treasures (Reginald's Tower) Inv. No. 1999.32. <<http://www.waterford-treasures.com/reginalds-tower/whats-inside/gaming-pieces-gaming-board>>. Date of Access: January 2020.

Knockanboy gaming board: See Simpson (1972); see also Bayless (2005 p. 14). Simpson discovered Bleakly's sketch amongst archived notes for the then-unpublished Ordnance Survey Memoirs, which have subsequently been issued as a forty-volume series. The author has not been able to inspect the published work but, if Bleakly's sketch and note on the Knockanboy game board is included, it will be in the Derrykeighan Parish entry of Day, A. and McWilliams, P. eds (1994) *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland, Vol. 16: Parishes of County Antrim V 1830-5, 1837-8, Giant's Causeway & Ballymoney*. Institute of Irish Studies in association with the Royal Irish Academy. Dublin 1990–1998.

⁴ On the graffiti boards of Buckquoy, see Ritchie (1976). Hall (2016) cites several other examples of stone boards in Scotland, while Hall (2011) offers a chronology and interpretation of gaming in elite and ecclesiastical contexts, suggesting Pictish game-board finds pre-date the Viking raid at Lindisfarne.

Anna Ritchie discusses the three incised graffiti game boards found in the Norse levels of the Buckquoy site. She describes them thus:

All three boards consist of undressed stone slabs which have been lightly incised with the same design of intersecting lines forming 36 cells or, more importantly, 49 intersections, with the central intersection marked by a circle. This is essentially the same design as that on the wooden board from Ballinderry in Ireland [...] which is formed by peg-holes instead of line-intersections; a double incised circle surrounds the central peg-hole, and incised arcs emphasise each of the corner holes (Ritchie, 1976, p. 187).

Emphasising the similarity between the Buckquoy boards and the Ballinderry board, Ritchie notes, “the Buckquoy boards belong to a Norse cultural assemblage and are most likely to have been used for *hnefatafl*; the similarity between the Ballinderry and Buckquoy boards underlines the common tradition behind these board-games” (Ritchie, 1976, p. 187). Given the propensity of funerary contexts for gaming artefacts in the archaeological record, it may be noteworthy that none of the stone boards retrieved from the Buckquoy site were funerary goods: one was retrieved from a midden; the others were identified in an excavation pile (see Ritchie 1976, p. 187).⁵

Anne Brundle discusses the stone gaming board from the Red Craig, Birsay, Orkney. Originally thought to be Viking, due to the very close proximity of the three Buckquoy boards “only yards from the Red Craig house” (Brundle 2004, online) the excavation of another board, from Howe, Stromness, in a Middle and Late Iron Age layer, prompted a re-evaluation;

⁵ The Ballinderry gaming board was retrieved from a bog, again a non-funerary context. However, gaming equipment is attested in a funerary context in Ireland. A bisomal passage burial at Knowth is discussed by Hall and Forsyth, who also cite other examples (see Hall and Forsyth 2011, pp. 1328–1330). It is also interesting to note that one of the Buckquoy boards has several erroneous grid lines, which have been “cancelled” with circles, thereby rendering the board usable, albeit visually cluttered with both the erroneous lines and the additional cancellation marks (see Ritchie 1976). Schädler suggests this is a “teaching board”, used to show how pieces are placed on the board (Schädler 2007, p. 370).

Brundle states the suggested date for all these Orkney boards is now “likely [...] Late Iron Age/Pictish”, c. 625–800 AD (Brundle 2004, online).⁶

The Ballinderry board (Fig. 2) is distinctive in appearance. Taking the form of a roughly square wooden tray, decorated with a patterned border set in eight panel-sections of carved interlace and geometric design on the topmost surface, the playing area is a 7 x 7 grid of holes to hold peg-type game pieces.⁷ Two carved figural heads, apparently serving as handles, protrude from opposite sides of the board. The central hole of the playing area is encircled by an incised double ring. The four corner holes are each made similarly distinct by an incised quadrant. The marking of the centre and corner peg holes strongly suggests a game of the *tafl* type. The board was excavated from the earliest occupation level of a fortified crannog (an artificial island or lake-dwelling) dated to the third quarter of the tenth century (Hencken *et al*, 1935–37).

Hencken *et al* consider the question of what game may have been played on the Ballinderry board and, perhaps persuaded by the peg holes, conclude “the most likely—or at any rate the least unlikely” to have been a fox-and-geese type game (Hencken *et al* 1935–37, p. 187). Eóin MacWhite’s discussion of early Irish board games includes the Welsh *tawlbwrdd* and *alea evangelii* in what he calls the “*tablut* family” (i.e. *tafl*), along with the Ballinderry board, which he hesitates to identify as *brandub* due to its then assumed Manx origin, but concludes, “[b]randub [...] seems to belong to the *tablut* family” and, given the number of pieces, a king and four supporters assailed by eight attackers, “the most suitable board for such numbers is a 7 x 7 board, precisely that of the Ballinderry board” (MacWhite 1956, pp. 34–35).⁸ As Anna Ritchie also notes, the similarity between the Ballinderry board and the Buckquoy boards strongly suggests the boards are marked for the same game, a *tafl*-type game with a special piece in the central space and significant corner spaces.

⁶ Brundle notes that, in Orkney, the Late Iron Age is divided in two: LIA I, c. 200–625AD and LIA II, c. 625–800AD.

⁷ Hencken *et al* note a peg-type antler playing piece, about 5.5 cm in length, which fits the holes on the board, was also excavated from the same layer as the two pieces of game board (Hencken *et al* 1935–37, p. 187).

⁸ Originally thought to display peculiarly Norse-Manx design properties (Hencken *et al* 1935–37, pp. 175–186), the Ballinderry gaming board has subsequently been reinterpreted in light of Irish metalwork and is now deemed to be of Irish, possibly Dublin, or Ballinderry manufacture. See Johnson (1999) pp. 47–56.

Figure 2: Ballinderry gaming board. Yew. 26.5 x 17 x 2.5 cm. Dublin. C10th. National Museum of Ireland. Inv. No. NMI 1932: 6533. Source: Hencken, et al. “Ballinderry Crannog No. 1”. *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*. 43 (1935–37). Reproduced by permission of the Royal Irish Academy.

Brandub and tawllbwrdd displace fidchell and gwyddbwyll in Ireland and Wales

Murray identifies an equivalence between the names of the Irish *fidchell* and the Welsh *gwyddbwyll*, each of which is mentioned in the respective national literature (“*Tochmarc Étaíne*” 3 in the Irish mythological cycle;

“*Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*” in the *Mabinogion* of Wales).⁹ He conflates *brandub* with *tawllbwrd*, asserting these *tafl* games had displaced the Welsh *gwyddbwyll* and the Irish *fidchell* which he identifies as localized forms of *latrunculi* that had come to Britain by the time of the Roman occupation (Murray 1952, p. 35): “in both countries the [*latrunculi*-type] game seems to have been supplanted about A.D. 1000 by the Norse game *hnefatafl* which was known in Welsh as *tawllbwrd*, an Irish board for which [i. e. the Ballinderry gaming board] was found in 1932” (Murray 1952, p. 34).¹⁰

Bayless accords with Murray, identifying *tawllbwrd* as *hnefatafl*, along with *brandub*, albeit played with 8:4 pieces on a 7 x 7 board, which she distinguishes from another 7 x 7 game, played in Ireland, Wales and Brittany as *fidchell*, *gwyddbwyll* and *gwezboell* respectively. This latter group, she suggests, was played with equally matched forces with custodial capture and may, therefore, be localized names for *latrunculi*, or a different, as yet unidentified, game (Bayless 2005, pp. 17–18).¹¹

MacWhite’s discussion of early Irish board games includes the observation that the e. C15th *An Leabhar Breac*¹² and the *Book of Lismore*¹³ include a tale concerning a game, *fidchell*, “with the figure of a hag at one

⁹ Allesandro Sanvito (2002, pp. 9–11) discusses examples of the game motif that appears in the *chansons de geste* (e.g. the *Lais of Marie de France*; the romans of Chretien de Troyes, etc) and the *Mabinogion*; the game in the former continental works being the modern and more fashionable chess, and *gwydd-bwyll* in the latter. Sterkx (1970) discusses the Irish tale of Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Foda. Sterkx also uses the term “*étrangement*” (strangulation) to refer to custodial capture.

¹⁰ Bayless (1985, p. 17) identifies a Breton game, *gwezboell*, name cognate with *gwyddbwyll* and Irish *fidchell*, all meaning “wood sense”, which we might take as knowing how to play the board game. Sanvito, however, notes the ancient Irish practice of “throwing wood” for divinatory purposes, a practice also known in Cornwall and Wales, hence “wood sense” also has a meaning of “prediction in the wood” (Sanvito 2002, p. 12).

¹¹ Murray, like Bayless, identifies the equivalence between the Irish and Welsh names *fidchell* and the Welsh *gwyddbwyll*. Bayless notes “the shared etymology suggests that the game may predate the separation of the languages” (Bayless 1985, p. 17). For Murray, “it was the same game as *latrunculi* which ... reached Britain during the Roman occupation and may easily have been learnt by the native population and spread to Ireland” (Murray 1952, p. 35). Sanvito (2004, p. 13) notes Duncan Forbes suggested *tawllbwrd* as a modified form of the Roman *ludus latruncularum* in an appendix to his *History of Chess* (1860).

¹² Royal Irish Academy MS 23 P 16 <<https://www.ria.ie/library/catalogues/special-collections/medieval-and-early-modern-manuscripts/leabhar-breac-speckled>>. Date of access: December 2019.

¹³ The MS is in the Chatsworth House collection. The Royal Irish Academy has copies.

end and the figure of a girl at the other”, adding “[w]hether the writer of the tale has any real board game in mind is open to doubt, and if it had, it is not the normal *fidchell*” (MacWhite 1945, p. 27). The identity of the game in the tale aside, the figures in image conjured by MacWhite certainly evokes, intentionally or otherwise, the design of the Ballinderry gaming board.

Wales

Robert C. Bell notes of *tawlbwrdd*, “this ancient Welsh game appears to have been introduced by the Norsemen, although records are tantalisingly incomplete. The laws of Howel Dha [*sic*] were drawn up between AD 914 and 943 and mention is made of *Tawl-bwrdd* or ‘Throw-board’ being one of the gifts being given to a judge on taking office” (Bell 1979, vol 2 pp. 43–44).¹⁴ Bell translates *tawlbwrdd* as “throw-board”, asserting: “in Welsh *tawl* is a throw and *tawlbwrdd* in its literal sense is a throw-board. This may indicate that some form of dice were employed in the game” (Bell 1979, vol 2 p. 44). Bell’s translation of “throw-board” would seem to arise from the assumption that something *is* thrown (e.g. dice) rather than that the board, like Claudius’s *alveus*, allows something to be thrown. Ulrich Schädler suggests the term may refer to the removal of captured pieces, which are “thrown off” the board (Schädler 2007, p. 370).

Frank Lewis (1941) offers a detailed discussion of Welsh terms related to board games, identifying a passage in the same Welsh law text cited by Bell that specifies the “six score pence” value of a set of *tawlbwrdd* pieces as thirty pence for the king and another thirty pence for his eight men, at thruppence three farthings each, and sixty pence for the sixteen white men, also thruppence three farthings each (Lewis 1941, p. 190).¹⁵ An interesting point

¹⁴ Hywel Dda [Howell the Good] (c. 880–948) ruled much of Wales and is credited with the codification of Welsh law in *Cyfraith Hywell* [*The Laws of Hywell*]. A digitised version of a mid-C13th Latin MS, *Leges Hywel Dda* (NLW Peniarth MS 28) is available via the National Library of Wales website <<http://hdl.handle.net/10107/4400109>> (Date of access: January 2020).

¹⁵ *Tawlbwrdd* sets and other artefacts, such as a harp and a gold ring, were presented to various officials of the court or judiciary on appointment, the value of the awarded attributes corresponding to the status of the position. The pieces or “men” (*gwerin*) for the king’s set was valued at six score pence, while those of a chancellor or a judge were worth three score pence (see Lewis 1943, pp. 191–192).

to note is that the number of pieces can allow the size of the board to be estimated as 9 X 9 (the same as size as the *tablut* game observed by Linnaeus, discussed below, which uses the same number of pieces).

However, as Lewis goes on to discuss, a later reference to *twlbwrdd* in a C16th manuscript by Robert ap Ifan (NLW Peniarth MS 158) specifies a king with *twelve* men defending against *twenty-four* assailants on an 11 x 11 board. As well as using a larger board to accommodate the additional pieces (i. e. larger than the 9 x 9 board that can be extrapolated from the number of pieces cited in Hywell Dda's Welsh law), Robert ap Ifan's manuscript includes a sketch (Fig. 3) which shows the cells on the board are shaded, but shaded in alternating rows rather than in a chequer-board pattern.¹⁶

Figure 3: Bell's reconstruction of Robert ap Ifan's 1587 tawlbwrdd diagram

¹⁶ The second, fourth, sixth and eighth rows are shaded in Robert ap Ifan's 1587 diagram. Bell (1979 vol. 2, pp. 43–44) assumes the tenth row should also be shaded and shows it as such in his rendition of the board with a suggested initial arrangement of the pieces. The shading is superfluous for *tafl* which requires minimal board markings. Might a board with markings such as those shown by Robert ap Ifan facilitate a *latrunculi*-type game with equal forces engaging from opposite sides of the board? A dexterity game, such as *shove ha'penny*, would also be possible. Bell notes that *shove ha'penny* "was played in English taverns at least as early as the sixteenth century" (Bell 1979 vol. 2, pp. 123–124).

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England

Alea evangelii, the so-called “Game of the Gospels”, is recorded uniquely in a mid-C12th Irish manuscript, Corpus Irish Gospels (Oxford Corpus Christi MS 122 fol. 5v) where it is shown in diagrammatic form on the bottom half of the page, below a depiction of the Eusebian Canon Tables, the canon tables being a textual tool designed to provide a concordance of, or cross-reference guide to, similar passages in the gospels (Fig. 4).

Joseph Armitage Robinson offers one of the earliest twentieth-century accounts of the *alea evangelii*, along with a transcription and paraphrased summary of the Latin text, beginning “*Incipit alea evangelii, quam Dubinsi epis[copus] Bennchorensis detulit rege Anglorum, id est, a domu Adalstani regis Anglorum, depicta a quodam Francone et a Romano sapiente, id est Israel*” [“Here begins the *alea evangelii*, which Dubinsi, Bishop of Bangor brought away from the king of the English, that is, from the house of Athelstan, king of the English, depicted by a certain Frank and a Roman scholar, that is Israel”] (Oxford CC MS 122 fol. 5v), and a transcription of the discussion on the following folios which, unfortunately, stops short of providing a set of rules for playing the game if, indeed, a game in the conventional sense, is what is depicted in the *alea evangelii* diagram (Robinson 1923, pp. 70–71 and pp. 171–181).

Martha Bayless suggests the *alea evangelii* is an “allegorized board-game [which] circulated at the court of Athelstan (924–939) and from there was taken to Dublin by Dub Innse (d. 953)” (Bayless 2005, p. 9).¹⁷ Michael

¹⁷ Athelstan was a grandson of Alfred the Great (c. 849–899) the king who, according to legend, burned the cakes while evading a Viking invasion. Athelstan was King of Wessex

Lapidge presents a convincing case that the *alea evangelii* was co-created at the court of Athelstan by Israel the Grammarian (probably c. 900–c. 970), a Breton scholar and poet (Lapidge 1992, pp. 97–99).¹⁸ Lapidge notes the Corpus Christi MS “was written ca. 1140 at Bangor, County Down” observing, “at the very beginning of this manuscript is a curious table described as the *Alea evangelii* or “Gospel Dice”; the table is a sort of board game based on the canon tables of the gospels” (Lapidge 1992, p. 99).¹⁹

Incipit alea euangelii quam Dubinsi episcopus Bennchorensis
detulit a rege Anglorum id est a domu Adalstani regis Anglorum,
depicta a quodam Francone et a Romano sapiente id est Israel
[Here begins the Gospel Dice which Dub Innse, bishop of
Bangor, brought from the English king, that is, from the
household of Athelstan, king of England, drawn by a certain

and, later, king of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia, ergo King of England, or *rege anglorum* as he is described in CC MS 122.

¹⁸ According to Lapidge’s account, Israel had spent time studying in Rome and had also learned Greek, before he entered the household of Athelstan where he co-devised *alea evangelii* (which Lapidge translates as “Gospel Dice”) with an unknown Frank. After Athelstan’s death in 939, Israel became tutor to Bruno of Saxony (Bruno the Great or Bruno Magnus, 925–965), the brother of Otto the Great and future Archbishop of Cologne, before entering the Abbey of St Maximin, Trier, toward the end of his life. He died on 26 April in probably 970. (Lapidge 1992). Could Bruno the Great or, perhaps, Archbishop Rotbert of Trier (c. 900–956) who, as Lapidge explains, was involved in arranging for Israel to become Bruno’s tutor, have been the unknown Frank?

¹⁹ Robinson provides an explanation of the layout and function of the Eusebian canon tables in an appendix that identifies differences between these tables and those of the Latin Vulgate (p. 173); he also provides a transcription of the Latin text of CC MS 122 related to the *alea evangelii*, together with a useful summary paraphrase (Robinson 1923, pp. 171–181). Nugent (2011 pp. 69–90) also provides a transcription of the Latin text of CC MS 122 including, helpfully, the annotations in the *alea evangelii* diagram which are difficult to read in C12th script with abbreviations and omissions. A more recent critical discussion of the Eusebian canon tables, drawing on concepts from post-structuralism and literary theory, may be found in Crawford (2019).

Franco (or: by a certain Frank) and by a Roman scholar, that is Israel]. (Lapidge 1992, p. 99)

Figure 4: Alea evangelii, Corpus Christi College, Oxford. MS 122 fol. 5v.

Lapidge sets out a scenario in which Dub Innse, Bishop of Bangor, visited the court of Athelstan (reigned 924–939) thereat acquiring, in some sense, knowledge of the *alea evangelii*, which was

brought back to Bangor from Athelstan's household sometime before the king's death in 939, and lay there inconspicuously until it was copied into the Corpus Gospels some two hundred years later, by which time the circumstances of its composition were largely forgotten: the scribe of the Corpus Gospels apparently put into the third person a note (written in the first person by Dub Innse himself?) accompanying the table. (Lapidge 1992, p. 99)

While the literary evidence for *alea evangelii* seems to be this single manuscript (the source material, *chez* Athelstan, from which the *alea evangelii* in CC MS 122 was apparently copied is not known) the archaeological evidence is similarly sparse. CC MS 122 shows what might be referred to as the “pieces” (a king piece, or *primarius vir* at the centre; 65 black squares; 4 unshaded squares set within larger unshaded squares (*varii viri*, or variegated men); and what appear to be 4 crosses on black backgrounds in each of the corners) of the *alea evangelii* set out on the intersections of a 19 x 19 board. The only known board of such a size is the Wimose fragment (Helmfrid 2005, p. 11) which Murray suggests is “identical in its dimensions” to the *alea evangelii* board (Murray 1952, p. 61). Youngs considers the Wimose fragment to be part of a *latrunculi* board (Youngs 1983, pp. 862–863).²⁰ While Parlett discusses the remains of the wooden Wimose board in the context of *alea evangelii* (Parlett 1999, p. 200), Schädler notes the Wimose fragment has a 19 x 19 grid on one side and marks for *duodecim scripta* on the other, showing an overlap between Roman and Anglo-Saxon gaming cultures (Schädler 2007, p. 372).²¹

Robinson's paraphrase of CC MS 122 notes that the arrangement of the board is such that the top edge or uppermost side is St Matthew's; the right

²⁰ Youngs notes the illustration of the Wimose fragment in Bell (1960) erroneously shows the Gokstad board; however, this error is corrected in the revised edition published by Dover as two volumes bound as one (i.e. Bell 1979).

²¹ For Schädler, the common custodial capture and affinity between the words *tafl*/*tabula* “clearly demonstrates a close connection” leading him to suggest the Wimose board is an import of Roman manufacture (Schädler 2007, p. 372).

side St Luke's; the bottom, St John's; and the left, St Mark's (Robinson 1923, p. 177). The names of the evangelists can also be read in the scribe's annotations in the outer border of the *alea evangelii* board or grid, clockwise: *Matheo, Luca; Iohane; Marco* (CC MS 122 fol. 5v).

The text of *alea evangelii* section of CC MS 122 sets out directions for *understanding* the positions marked by the black squares. These positions are apparently calculated by performing multiplications or other numerical functions that are based on or drawn from the canon tables. Robinson notes, however, several scribal errors in the manuscript; for example: “[the canon] tables are by a mistake numbered consecutively 1 to 5 (or 6): for Jo[hn] the second line should be numbered 3 [...] if properly numbered these tables would show how the evangelists are ‘multiplied’” [and] in the diagram the cross and No. 4 have been wrongly placed” (Robinson 1923, pp. 178–179) concluding, “in a few instances it is clear that the table has been wrongly copied. There is one man missing [...] and some pieces may possibly have got on to wrong lines. The dots placed near the men are intended to indicate the Evangelists [...] but they do not always seem to be accurately assigned” (Robinson 1923, p. 180). Robinson discusses the apparent errors, and whether the dots might be part of the original orthography or later additions made by “some early student who was trying to identify the pieces in accordance with the terms of the explanation” (Robinson 1923, p. 180).

It is indeed possible to follow the text of the *alea evangelii* and identify the placement of the designated black squares as representing one of other of the evangelists, but there is no “game” as such. *Pace* Robinson, “we may leave the game to the ingenious reader. He will find that he can follow the setting of the pieces by a study of the facsimile. [...] We may wonder whether after all this *alea evangelii* is not rather a puzzle than a game, whether its interest does not end with the setting or identification of the pieces on the board” (Robinson 1923, 180–181).

Similarly, Ian Riddler discusses the *alea evangelii*, observing:

The illustration of a *hnefatafl* board in Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 122, an Irish manuscript of the eleventh century, invokes the use of sides of twenty-four and forty-eight on a board of 18 x 18 squares, but **the purpose of the accompanying text lies in the association of board games with the evangelists and its elaborate number symbolism must be seen in that context**; in all probability, it is far too large to

represent a real gaming board (Riddler 2007, p. 256) [my emphasis]

Robinson's analysis of the explanatory text accompanying the *alea evangelii* includes the telling phrase "fanciful reasons" (Robinson 1923, p. 173) and Riddler's conclusion that the "game" is symbolic rather than a real game, leads one to consider it akin to an Anglo-Saxon precursor of Wink Martindale's "Deck of Cards" (1959).²² That is, the *alea evangelii* is not a *game* so much as an *aide memoire*, an elaborate means of providing the student of scripture a means or a method of either learning the Eusebian canon tables, or else demonstrating that knowledge by performing a feat of recollection in reciting or recalling the various positions or rotations of the four evangelists in a gospelic form of the knight's tour.²³

Scandinavia

This final section will concentrate on a single significant example. The key to unravelling the mystery of *tafl* games was found in a Scandinavian game, *tablut*, which, ironically, also served to compound the confusion surrounding the game. As is extensively documented in the literature of game studies, the botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778) made a note of a game he had seen during his research trip in the summer of 1732 to what was then referred to as Lapland.²⁴ Linnaeus's route took him along the

²² "Deck of Cards" is a spoken word ballad purportedly telling the tale of a US soldier facing a court martial for the offence of playing cards during a church service. The narrator explains the soldier's defence is based on the premise that each of the cards represents biblical themes and figures, before claiming the veracity of the tale resides in the fact that the narrator is himself the soldier. While various versions have been recorded, Wink Martindale's version was popular in the UK and the US in the late 1950s, featuring in the popular music charts in both countries.

²³ The Knight's Tour is a puzzle or mathematical problem in which a single chess piece, the knight, is moved around a chess board in a sequence of moves, the aim being for the knight to visit every square.

²⁴ Helmfrid provides a concise explanation: "Lapland is a historic province in the northern part of Sweden and Finland, which was named after the Swedish word for the aboriginal Saami population. Sweden-Finland was a united kingdom at the time when the province first appeared. The province was split in two [...] when the Russians conquered Finland in 1809 [...] The Saami are often referred to as Lapps or Laplanders in older

Swedish coast of the northernmost part of the Baltic Sea, the Gulf of Bothnia (Fig. 5), with several incursions inland. Linnaeus (Fig. 6) kept a journal of his journey which is a remarkable document for a number of reasons, not least for the entry recording the game *tablut*.²⁵ We shall give Linnaeus's journal some further consideration after a discussion of the impact of the *tablut* entry on the field of game studies. It is worth noting, however, that the Sami word *tablut*, *tablo* or *dablo*, like the Anglo-Saxon *tæfl* and Latin *tabula*, is a generic term for board game (see Helmfrid 2005 np; see also Michaelsen 2010, p. 218).

In one of his journal entries, Linnaeus describes a game that sets 16 attacking pieces against 8 defending pieces arranged around a king piece placed at the centre of a 9 x 9 board (Linnaeus 1811 ii, pp. 54–59).

Linnaeus's description of the game came to the attention of game historian Harold Murray who, citing a translated transcription of the journal entry in his *History of Chess*, noted the similarity between the game recorded by the botanist and a game described in several of the Icelandic sagas. For example, in a discussion of a C12th version of *Olaf's Saga*, by Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), Murray notes that two historians, Daniel Willard Fiske (1831–1904) and Gudbrand Vigfusson (1827–1889), each suggest an incident in the saga, involving King Knut in a dispute over a chess move, results from Snorri “modernising” his account so that the game in the dispute appears to be chess rather than the older and, presumably, by-then un-fashionable, *hnefatafl*. There is a similarity between this “chess dispute” episode and other chess-dispute scenes in the Icelandic sagas. The *Knýtlynga Saga* refers to an incident arising from a “chess” game, as does *Porgil's Saga* (see Murray 1913, pp. 443–444). For Murray “the game in *Frithiof's Saga*, which modern translators have made chess, is in the original Icelandic *hnefatafl*” (Murray 1913, p. 444).

English literature, but both these names are nowadays regarded as deprecatory” (Helmfrid 2005, p. 16 n. 2).

²⁵ Linnaeus's journal is a pioneering work of ethnography as well as an interesting account of a remarkable journey and a record of flora and fauna. However, critics suggest it also contains some falsifications as Linnaeus seems to have exaggerated, omitted or deliberately mis-recorded some aspects of his journey (see, for example, Zorgdrager 2008).

Figure 5: Map of Linnaeus' Lapland Journey. Source: *Tijdschrift voor Scandinavistiek* 29 1&2 (2008).

Figure 6: Linnaeus in his Lapland dress. Mezzotint Etching (1805), Robert Dunkarton after a portrait by Robert Hoffman. 505 mm x 333 mm. British Museum, London. 1896,0612.2 © Trustees of the British Museum.

However, Murray's account is not entirely unproblematic. Indeed, the contemporary confusion concerning the rules of *tafl* games, particularly with regard to the aim of the defending player who seeks to get the king piece to safety, can be said to arise from Murray's initial account in 1913, and

then further amplified by Murray's subsequent discussion in his survey, *A History of Board Games Other Than Chess* (1952 p. 56). A second problem concerns the method by which the king is captured, which will be addressed after discussion of the king's escape.

As Sten Helmfrid observes of the first problem, "The most simple escape rule is for the king to reach any square in the periphery of the board. It turns out that for any reasonable initial arrangement of the pieces, this gives a huge advantage to the king's side. Unfortunately, due to misinterpretation of the original texts, it is a widespread misconception that most *tafl* games used this simple rule" (Helmfrid 2005, p. 2). While Helmfrid gets straight to the heart of the problem, it should be clarified that by "original texts", Helmfrid is referring not to arcane passages in the Icelandic sagas, or to some Norse or Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the cuneiform tablet, dating from 177BC, on permanent display in the British Museum alongside the Royal Game of Ur, setting out the rules of the game of twenty squares (see Finkel 2007), but to Carl Linnaeus's journal of 1732, *Iter Lapponicum*, and to James Edward Smith's 1811 English translation thereof, *Lachesis Lapponica*.²⁶

Murray, in his *History of Chess* (1913), set out the rules of *hnefatafl* as he understood them from reading Smith's 1811 translation of Linnaeus, asserting "play is by alternate moves, and the one player endeavours to bring his King to the edge of the board while the other tries to confine him so that he has no power of moving" (Murray 1913, p. 445). Murray later refined this to state: "The player with the king wins if in his turn of play the king has an open row or column to the edge of the board; his opponent wins if he captures the king" (Murray 1952, p. 56). Thus, it would appear that Murray is responsible for propagating the idea of the "edge escape" rule which, as widely discussed in literature relating to the balance of the *tafl* family of games, favours the defending player, resulting an unbalanced game.

R. Wayne Schmittberger, for example, found the game as described by Linnaeus presented a seemingly unresolvable dilemma as he asserts, "it is

²⁶ Smith notes in his preface to the 1811 edition of *Lachesis Lapponica* that the translation of Linnaeus's manuscript was undertaken by Charles Troilius who encountered considerable difficulties in deciphering Linnaeus's handwriting; the original notation combines Swedish with sometimes non-standard and idiosyncratic Latin. The 1811 edition is usually referred to as "Smith's" translation as Smith, as editor, effectively rewrote the journal for publication. See Smith's preface (Linnaeus 1811, pp. x–xiv).

impossible to create a perfect balance between the players unless a draw is the correct outcome [as] in Tablut draws are not possible” (Schmittberger, 1992, p. 25). Hence, Schmittberger proposed two novelty mechanics in order to rebalance the game, “*bidding* and *the pie rule*” (Schmittberger, 1992, p. 25).

For Schmittberger, “a bid amounts to a promise. Whoever promises, by making the lowest bid, to escape with his king in fewer turns, gets the right to play the king’s side. But the king must escape within the promised number of moves, or the player loses the game” (Schmittberger, 1992, p. 25).

Schmittberger links the bidding mechanic to the so-called “pie rule”:

When players reach the point of agreeing the best first bid, the pie rule can be employed to achieve an even finer balance. One player (chosen at random) begins by making one or more moves in the game’s starting position—say, one move for the Black army and one move for the White army. He also states a bid that he thinks is as fair as possible. The opponent then gets to play whichever side he chooses, but must accept both the initial moves and the bid (Schmittberger, 1992, p. 25).

Schmittberger’s proposal for the players to engage in a form of meta-discourse or enforced foreplay, appears, to the present author at least, to detract from the game itself.

Helmfrid, acknowledging “the degree of imbalance can be adjusted by changing [...] the initial arrangement of pieces and the escape route for the king” (Helmfrid 2005, p. 2), goes on to discuss ways in which the task of adjusting the handicap for the escaping king can be modified in ways which avoid novelty mechanics or extraneous solutions (Helmfrid 2005, *passim*). Damian Walker (2014) has also discussed the problem of balance in several games in the *tafl* family.

Taking Occam’s Razor to the problem of the king’s escape in *tafl*, we can find the simplest answer by looking at the simplest board.²⁷ The Ballinderry gaming board differentiates the central position and the four

²⁷ Occam’s Razor is a philosophical principle attributed to the C14th Franciscan, William of Ockham. The principle holds that, when competing explanations or theories are offered, the simplest is preferred. See *Encyclopaedia Britannica* <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Occams-razor>>. Date of access: January 2020.

corner points. Not only does this physical evidence apparently demonstrate the starting position of the king in the double-ringed central space, but also identifies the end points with the singly-inscribed quadrants, showing these as also special, by dint of the marking, which also differentiates them from the double-ringed central space.

Pushing the point, why invent another game mechanic or *ludeme* when a perfectly serviceable and coherent mechanic already exists?²⁸ The game becomes more complex when the mechanic is transposed to a larger grid with more pieces, but the fundamental mechanics of capture (custodial) and escape (corner) have no need to change. As the number of pieces and the size of the board increases, the game can appear to change through the arrangement of the starting position of defending forces arranged around the king and, similarly, the placement of the attacking force in four groups, in harmonious and aesthetically pleasing clusters.

Turning to the second problem, Linnaeus's journal, *Iter Lapponicum*, records fourteen rules (Linnaeus 1732, p. 135).²⁹ However, J. E. Smith's translation includes only twelve (Linnaeus 1811 vol. 2, pp. 55–58).³⁰ As noted by John C. Ashton (2010 §3) and others (e. g. Walker 2014, p. 16), the translations were not ideal.

²⁸ David Parlett defines “ludeme” as a “conceptual element of play”; in the words of Thierry Depaulis: “a basic component of game structure”. The term is a compound of the Latin *ludus* and Richard Dawkins's selfish coinage, “meme” (Parlett 2016, p. 81). Depaulis, however, disagrees with Parlett's etymology. Depaulis asserts the term *ludeme* was first coined by Pierre Berloquin, a French game inventor and author, as early as 1970: “It is not a compound of *ludus* and Dawkins's *meme* (as Dawkins was then unknown in France) but of a more general suffix taken from linguistics, as *phoneme*, *grapheme*, *morpheme*, and the like, which had become fashionable among promoters of structuralism—e.g. Lévi-Strauss's *mytheme* (1958). Berloquin told me he was much influenced by these theories in the early 1970s” (personal correspondence).

²⁹ A facsimile of the manuscript can be seen on the website of the Linnean Society of London <<http://linnean-online.org/165368/>>. The tablut entry is on p. 135. The Society was founded by Sir James E. Smith in 1788 whom, much to the chagrin of the Swedes, following the death of Linnaeus's son in 1784, acquired Linnaeus's library, manuscripts and various specimen collections from Linnaeus's widow and took them to England before a Swedish buyer could be found, or before the king of Sweden, Gustav III, who was abroad at the time of the sale, could act. See Blunt (1971) pp. 236–238.

³⁰ Smith omits Rule 13, which refers to the starting positions of the Muscovites (16 in four phalanges), and Rule 14, which refers to the role of the central square (sometimes referred to as the “konakis”) in capture.

Linnaeus did not speak the Lapp language, and so had to arrive at an understanding of the game by induction, presenting examples of permissible moves for the pieces. Another part of the problem was that Linnaeus's use of Latin contained cryptic abbreviations and various errors of syntax that made translation difficult. A final part of the problem was that these errors were compounded: Murray used Smith's translation (Murray 1913, 445–446) and subsequent game historians used Murray (Bell 1960; Bell 1969; Parlett 1999). (Ashton 2010, §3)

Perhaps the most significant fault in Smith's translation occurs in the rendition of Linnaeus's Rule 9. In Linnaeus's original journal entry, Rule 9 is written as follows:³¹

9. *Si quis hostem 1 inter 2 sibi hostes collocare possit, est occisus et ejici debet, etiam Rex.*

This can be translated as “if one piece is between two enemies it is killed and ejected, likewise the king”.³² The meaning would appear to be self-evident: a piece is captured or “killed” and removed from the board when it is between two enemy pieces.³³ Crucially, the final clause “likewise the king”) appears to state that the king is captured in the same way. However, in Smith's 1811 translation, Rule 9 is rendered thus:

9. If any one man gets between two squares occupied by his enemies, he is killed and taken off, **except the king**, who is not liable to this misfortune. [my emphasis]

³¹ The text cited is from the 1913 edition of *Iter Lapponicum*, published by the Royal Swedish Academy of Science. Linnaeus's manuscript, housed in the Linnaean Society of London, can be seen online <<http://linnean-online.org/165368/>>; the tablut entry is on p. 135.

³² Aage Nielsen presents several translations of Linnaeus's journal, side-by-side: <http://aagenielsen.dk/tablut_translations.html> Date of access: January 2020.

³³ Unless a piece moves voluntarily between two enemy pieces, as in *Nefatavl*, the reconstruction of *hnefatafl* by the Danish archaeological publication *Skalk*. The rules are available online: <https://www.skalk.dk/media/1452/nefatavl_game-instructions-in-english.pdf> Date of access: January 2020.

It is this translation, which changes “likewise the king” to “except the king”, thereby inverting the applicability of the rule to the king to its precise opposite, that informed Murray’s discussion in his *History of Chess* (1913).

As for Linnaeus’s journal, and his journey to the Sami hinterland, the *tablut* entry is oft quoted in game studies literature, but rarely probed beyond the mechanics of the game and quotidian concerns of language and omission (Linnaeus did not speak Sami; his notes were not sufficiently detailed, etc.). Questions such as, where on his journey did Linnaeus encounter the game, and in what context, appear unexplored. The 1811 edition translated by Smith includes some dates and a wide range of topics are discussed following the date July 21 (Linnaeus 1811, vol. 2 p. 37) including reindeer husbandry with parenthetical interjections (e.g. Linnaeus 1811, vol. 2 p. 45) and cross-references from Smith, before entries describing games and recreation (Linnaeus 1811, vol. 2 pp. 50ff), including the dexterity game *spetto* and the strategy game *tablut*. The passages following this section discourse on matters as diverse as plants, hospitality, the days of the week, footwear, and courtship before the next date, July 23 (Linnaeus 1811, vol. 2 p. 81) when Linnaeus declares “I took leave of the alpine part of Lapland”.

However, the organisation and eclectic nature of the preceding section is such that it is not possible to determine exactly where on Linnaeus’s journey the observation of *tablut* was made, or even if the observation was made with alpine, forest or coastal Sami, the former groups of whom Linnaeus distinguishes between with the following commentary:

Here I think it worth while to observe, that the alpine Laplanders are more honest, as well as more good-natured, than those who dwell in the woodlands. Having acquired more polish from their occasional intercourse with the inhabitants of towns, the latter have, at the same time, learned more cunning and deceit, and are frequently very knavish. The inhabitants of the alps dwell in villages formed of their tents, living together [...] in great comfort and harmony. Those who occupy the woody parts of the country live dispersed” (Linnaeus 1811, vol. 2 p. 51).

Cross-referencing between the main body of the *Lachesis Laponnica* and its appendix, the *Iter Laponnica*, Linnaeus's manuscript (available digitally via the London Linnaean Society) and commentaries such as Blunt (1971) and Zorgdrager (2008), one can examine various points and dates in Linnaeus's journey and follow the chronology. It can be summarised thus:

After leaving Uppsala at 11.00 on May 12, 1732, Linnaeus travelled north along the coast for eleven days and, upon reaching Umeå, headed inland towards Lycksele.³⁴ After spending two weeks (the last week of May and the first week of June) on this first inland incursion, Linnaeus returns to the coast and continues north to Pithoea (Piteå), *en route* to Luleå, "being very desirous of reaching the alps of Luleån Lapland time enough to see the sun above the horizon" (Linnaeus 1811, vol. 2 p. 256). The next entry in the appendix, dated June 25, records the second inland incursion, a journey "on the river of Luleå [for three] successive days and nights", before reaching Quickjock [Kvikkjokk] where provisions for eight days are obtained "from the famous wife of the curate Mr Grot" (Linnaeus 1811, vol. 2 p. 257). The supplies are for the onward journey to the mountains, which were reached on July 6. Nellejet Zorgdrager finds this part of the journey, i.e. after departing Kvikkjokk, "highly improbable" (Zorgdrager 2008, pp. 57–58). Unfortunately, this is the section of the expedition in which Linnaeus would seem to have observed *spetto* and *tablut* between 21–23 July.

A careful reading reveals on July 6 Linnaeus and his companion ascend Wallavari, a mountain on which are people we assume to be alpine Sami, described as non-Swedish speaking "wild people" (Linnaeus 1811, vol. 2 pp. 257–258); the evening of the following day (July 7) they meet "the nearest Laplander" who offers "a very good reception", providing reindeer skins for Linnaeus to sleep between, boiled reindeer milk ("rather too rich for [Linnaeus's] stomach"), and a spoon washed in spit (Linnaeus 1811, vol. 2 p. 260). The following day (July 8) they head toward the alps and descend toward the plains of Norway where Linnaeus "took up abode at the house of a ship-master, with whom I had made an agreement to be taken in a boat" (Linnaeus 1811, vol. 2 p. 262). After the boat trip in the Norwegian sea (July 9) Linnaeus stays at the house of the pastor of Torfjorden, Mr Rask.

³⁴ The 1811 edition of *Lachesis Laponnica* includes an appendix, "A Brief Narrative", which offers additional commentary from Linnaeus. Smith notes a discrepancy between the dates in Linnaeus's manuscript and what he calls "the original journal" (Linnaeus 1811, vol. 2 p. 264); see note 25 [above].

The next day (July 10) was spent battling wind in, possibly, another boat trip (p. 263) before they return to the mountains (July 11).

On July 15 (according to Smith's amendment (see Linnaeus 1811, vol. 2 p. 264) Linnaeus, his guide, and companion cum "servant/interpreter" began the return leg of the inland incursion, heading toward Torneå via Caituma [Kaitumälven] stopping short of any engagement with the "wild" inhabitants of Caituma, deciding to return to Kvikkjokk. However, Linnaeus falls into a hole and has to be rescued by his guides (Linnaeus 1811, vol. 2 pp. 265–266). Linnaeus and his companion cum "servant/interpreter" spend four days at Kvikkjokk before returning to Luleå on a raft constructed by the pair (Linnaeus 1811, vol. 2 p. 267); they reach Luleå on July 30.

Where then are Linnaeus's encounters with the dexterity game *spetto* and with the board game *tablut*? It would seem some of the mysteries of Linnaeus's journey, and the circumstances of his recording of *tablut* in particular, retain some secrets that are still to be unravelled.

Conclusion

The most significant misunderstanding relating to *tafl* games is the confusion over the escape rule and the capture of the king, arising from the way in which the notes on *tablut* were recorded in Linnaeus's journal and the subsequent translation issues, which were compounded in turn by Murray's amplification and expansion of this confusion in his two monumental works (1913, 1952).

Other problems in understanding arise from the ongoing misuse of terms such as "chess" and "draughts" to refer to board games played in places occupied by Anglo-Saxons and Vikings in the centuries before draughts and chess were introduced to Europe. As shown, the nomenclature relating to the *tafl* group of games is fraught with misunderstandings, from the assumption that dice were used in *twell-bwrdd* ("throw-board") and the complexities of terminology exemplified by Bayless in her attempt to set out distinct usages, to the status of *alea evangelii* which may be a symbolic representation or an *aide memoire* rather than a game *per se*.

While this exploration has sought to probe areas of uncertainty and to offer some clarity where confusion has prevailed, there are still some areas to be illuminated before we can fully appreciate and understand the *tafl*

games that are still emerging from the dark ages and have yet to be fully brought into the light.

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