Warband on point, dollars down . . .

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I began my search for chess in the Gaelic world by looking at the board-games which were played in ancient Ireland and therefore, presumably, in ancient Scotland also. Three games were to the fore — called *fidchell*, *buanfach* and *brannamh* — but none of them appear to be equivalent to chess as we know it.

When board-games begin to appear in Scottish Gaelic literature, however, they are described rather vaguely as *tàileasg*. This is the modern form of a word which first appears as *táibles*, *táiplis* or *táiplesc*, and is simply a borrowing from medieval French or English *tables*. These words originally denoted a game known in Latin as *tabula*, which can be traced back to the first century AD in Europe.

During the 15th century the English name *tables* came to denote any board game, including backgammon and chess. Chess had been brought to the British Isles four hundred years earlier, and it was already three centuries since the 'Lewis Chessmen' were carved in Norway from walrus ivory, but chess was only just beginning to oust the others as the most popular board-game in English-speaking Britain. The evidence suggests that in Gaelic kingdoms like the Lordship of the Isles the game played down to this point was *brannamh*, and that when this custom had run its course what took its place was not chess but backgammon.

Backgammon is a race game, as opposed to chase games like *brannamh* and *tablut* (the Lapp game which I mentioned last time) and battle games like chess, draughts and (apparently) *fidchell*. What distinguishes a chase game from the rest is that its sides have unequal numbers of men; but what distinguishes a race game from the rest is its use of gambling, money and dice.

Backgammon, then, is a game eminently suited to a cash economy, and the cash economy can be said to have entered the Highlands and Islands during the sixteenth century. The first we hear of it in Scotland is in a poem in the Book of the Dean of Lismore, which was compiled in Perthshire by a clergyman called James MacGregor during the years 1512-42. The poem begins *Mór tubaist na tàiplisge*, 'Great is the upset of the tables', and it is a raunchy piece which describes love-making between a man and a woman in terms of a game of backgammon. It has fifteen verses, but these two from the middle will give the flavour of it.

M' fhoireann sìos do shocraicheas
'S chraitheas mo dhà dhìsle,
Thugas treas ar ghontaichibh,
Uaidh gur tileadh na tìthe.

(I set down my warband / And shook my two dice, / I spent a while taking / Till the points were being filled.) The verb *gonaim*, 'I wound', is the technical term used for 'taking' or capturing' a man; it was used in *fidchell*, and is used again by the Blind Harper in the last verse quotation in this article.

A leth-chlàr sa làn-tilte
Tharla 's m' fhoireann-sa bàthte —
Ach tìthe na tàiplisge
Falamh, 's mise an-airde.

(With just half the board full / Overwhelmed was my warband — / There was I on top, but empty / Were the points of the tables!) But before the century was out, a MacGregor poet had set a more lasting pattern with this impressionistic description of a *real* game of backgammon.

Pìob ga spreigeadh,
Fìon ga leigeadh,
Luchd leadan ann ri ceàrrachas:
Foireann air thì,
Dolaran sìos,
Galain den fhìon bhàrcaideach.

(Pipe being stirred up, / Wine being broached, / Long-haired people gambling: / Warband on point, / Dollars down, / Gallons of flowing wine.) It will be noticed from all three verses quoted so far that the word *tì*, 'point', which we last met in the game of *brannamh*, survived very well the transition to the backgammon board, and that the counters are consistently referred to as the *foireann* or warband. All the same is true of this quotation from Iain Lom, addressing Sir Donald MacDonald of Sleat in the early 1600s, except that the plural *fòirne* is used instead of *foireann*.

Ruaig air dhìsnean,
Fòirn' air thìthibh
'S òr a-sìos mar gheall
Aig ogh' Iarl' Ìle
'S Chinn Tìre,
Rois 's Innse Gall.

(Battering of dice, / Warbands on points / And gold put down in wager / By the grandson of the Earl of Islay / And of Kintyre, / Of Ross and the Western Isles.) In neither of these quotations is the game named, but the omission is rectified in countless evocations of the same image over two hundred years. The overall picture is clear. The game is *tàileasg*. I have been translating this judiciously as 'tables', but it must be backgammon, because the atmosphere is noisy and festive: bets are placed, dice are thrown, counters rattle around the board.

Mur b'e eagal a dà phàrant
'S mi 'n eilean dubh air an t-sàile,
Dh'iomairinn, dh'éibhinn, dh'òlainn, phàighinn,
Chuirinn mo chluich air an tàileasg,
Air na dìsnean geala cnàmha
'S air na cairtean breaca bàna.

(Were it not for fear of her two parents / And I being in a black isle on the salt sea, / I'd play, I'd shout, I'd drink, I'd pay, / I'd make my play on the tables / With the bright dice of ivory / And at the speckled white cards.) It was clearly a game in which decibels were regarded as a virtue. Let no-one claim that these 'tables' so tersely mentioned at Dunvegan by Màiri nighean Alastair Ruaidh could ever have been of chess . . .

Gum biodh faram air thàilisg
Agus fuaim air a' chlàrsaich
Mar a bhuineadh do shàr mhac MhicLeòid.

(There'd be noise at the tables / And sound on the harp / As was right for MacLeod's splendid son.) Indeed, as depicted by the MacLean poet Eachann Bacach, Duart Castle is little less than a well-run casino.

Bhiodh na ceàrraich le braise
Iomairt tàilisg mu seach orr',
Fir fòirne ri tartar,
Toirm 's màthadh air chairtean,
Dolair Spàinnteach 's tastain
Bhiodh gan dìoladh gun lasan 'nan lorg.

(The boisterous gamblers / Played tables in turns, / Warband men rattling / Calling and trumping at cards, / Spanish dollars and testoons / Being paid without anger resulting.) And James Bond would have felt well at home in Duntulm.

Bidh cruit agus clàrsaich
'S mnà uchd-àillidh
An tùr nan tàileasg gearr.

(There'll be lyres and harps / And fair-bosomed women / In the tower of the short tables.) Why the tables should be 'short' I am not quite sure, unless it is simply a way of distinguishing gaming-tables from dining-tables. If so, it shows that the poet (Iain Lom) was well aware of the English, French or Latin word that lay behind *tàileasg*.

Finally, two quotations which lay stress on the dice. As we have seen, they were made of bone. Usually they are called *dìsnean* — like *tàileasg* itself, a borrowed word that reveals the alien origin of the game. But here Eachann Bacach — if tradition reports him accurately — calls them *cnaip*, 'cubes'.

Bhiodh cnaip na h-àraiche braise —
Iomairt tàilisg mu seach orr',
Fir feòirne ri tartraich.

(The cubes of boisterous battle — / Playing tables in turn with them, / Warband men rattling.) And around 1700 the Blind Harper from Lewis, a man more sensitive to sound than most, described them like this:

Anns an fheasgar 'na dhéidh
An àm teastadh don ghréin tràth-nòn',
Fir a' cnapraich mun chlàr
'S cath air a ghnàth chur leò,
Dà chomhairleach ghearr
(Gun labhairt, ge b' ard an glòir)
'S a Rìgh, bu tìtheach an guin
Do dhaoine gun fhuil gun fheòil!

(In the evening that followed / As the afternoon sun declined, / Men rattled around the board / Waging battle as of old, / With two short advisers / (Speechless, though loud was their voice) / And Lord, how sharply they'd wound / For folk without blood or flesh!)

Also about 1700, in his 'Description of the Western Isles of Scotland', Martin Martin refers to a dice game played in the big house of Berneray, Harris, which he says is called in Irish 'Falmer-more'. By Irish he means Gaelic, and by 'Falmer-more' he means *falmair mór* or 'great palmer'. A palmer was a crusader, wanderer or pilgrim to the Holy Land, so the Gaelic name perhaps suggests where the game was believed to originate. If it is a form of backgammon, the name is also descriptive of how the pieces travel around the board. This is what Martin tells us.

"Sir Norman MacLeod and some others playing at tables, at a game called in Irish Falmer-more, wherein there are three of a side, and each of them throw the dice by turns, there happened to be one difficult point in the disposing of one of the table-men. This obliged the gamester to deliberate before he was to change his man, since upon the disposing of it the winning or losing of the game depended.

"At last the butler, who stood behind, advised the player where to place his man; with which he complied, and won the game. This being thought extraordinary, and Sir Norman hearing one whisper him in the ear, asked who advised him so skilfully? He answered, it was the butler; but this seemed more strange, for he could not play at tables. Upon this, Sir Norman asked him how long it was since he had learnt to play? And the fellow owned that he never played in his life, but that he saw the spirit Browny reaching his arm over the player's head, and touched the part with his finger, on the point where the table-man was to be placed. This was told me by Sir Norman and others who happened to be present at the time."

In my next article I will bring the strands together by coming back to the big question — what is the Gaelic for chess?