

Wood-sense and raven-black

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

WHAT is the Gaelic for chess? This is a question which I have been asked more than once. There isn't a straight answer, so I will try to identify one in the course of this and the next two articles by tracing the history of board-games in the Gaelic world.

Three kinds of board-game are named in early Irish sources — *fidchell*, *buanchach* and *brandub*. They were examined in an article in the Irish periodical *Éigse* many years ago by Eóin MacWhite, and I will summarise what he has to say on each of them.

Fidchell means 'wood-sense'. It is described in Irish stories, written down in the Early Middle Ages, which appear to depict life in the Iron Age, that is, around the time of Christ. It was played on a four-sided board between two individuals. It seems normally to have been won by alternate players, presumably because the attacker had an inbuilt advantage. The lines of the board were straight and there were black and white on them — chequered like a chess board, or more likely, bearing black and white pieces. Capture was by enclosure, that is, a man was taken when two pieces of the opposite side occupied the squares adjacent to it and in the same straight line. The normal move was probably the same as that of the rook in chess. The pieces of the opposing sides were of different colour or material, and apparently there were an equal number on both sides. The object was the capturing of the opponent's pieces, or his annihilation.

This evidence suggests that *fidchell* was a battle game like Greek *poleis* (meaning 'cities', but we might as well call it 'police') and Roman *ludus latruncularum* ('highwaymen'). Both involved capture by enclosure, as described above. In *poleis*, the pieces are of different colours, and the number of men varied according to the size of the board — one account gives it as sixty, presumably thirty on each side. The rook's move was the one used, and backward moves may have been allowed.

Ludus latruncularum was played on a board with lines and spaces, the pieces were of glass of different colours, and backward moves were allowed. It was won by the player who succeeded in removing the most pieces. Stone boards, probably used to play this game, have been found in Britain and other parts of the Roman Empire; they are generally eight inches square, but measurements vary. Eighteen counters, of which some differed in design from the rest, were found near one of them.

The second Irish game, *buanchach*, means perhaps 'lasting-blow'. All that can be said of it is that it is a board-game as old as *fidchell*. Cú Chulainn played it with his charioteer Loeg in the saga *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

The third Irish game, *brandub*, means 'raven-black'. It seems to have had lower status than *fidchell*, and its heyday was the Late Middle Ages, by which time the name had become *brannumh* or *brannamh*. It was played on a board with the centre square marked. This was reserved for the *branán*, a king-type piece. The four corner-squares may also have been refuges for the *branán*. This word *branán*, 'little raven', became a common poetic expression for a king or chief. It often appears in the form *branán déad*, 'branán of ivory'.

Brandub sounds like a simplified version of *fidchell*. It appears to have been played with eight attacking pieces on one side and five defending pieces, including the king, on the other. One verse description refers to *cuiciur airgit gil can glór / ocus ochtúr do dergór* — 'five voiceless men of bright silver / and eight of red gold'.

How big was a *brandub* board? To have a centre square it had to have an odd number of rows. Eóin MacWhite pointed out that a game with thirteen pieces would be played on a 7 x 7 board, 5 x 5 being too small and 9 x 9 too large; 9 x 9 was the size of the board for *tablut*, an ancient 25-piece game which survived among the Lapps and was described by the Swedish botanist Linnaeus. As it happens, a 7 x 7 board, perfect for *brandub*, has been found in a crannog (artificial lake dwelling) in Lough Derg on the Shannon. Its decoration shows that it was made in the Viking kingdom of Man about 950-975 AD. It has peg-holes instead of squares, with the centre peg-hole and the four corner ones marked off.

Brandub is mentioned too early in Irish literature to have been a Norse invention, and its name is Gaelic, but one wonders if it represents the struggle between Christianity and paganism. When MacWhite tried adapting the rules of *tablut* to a 7 x 7 board, he found that: "The probable placing of the pieces was the king on the central point with one defender before him, one behind him, and one on each side of him. The attacking pieces were placed in twos in the same rows as the king's defenders, the whole then being in the form of a cross."

Since the king is the *branán*, it would appear that the pagans are the defenders and the Christians the attackers, which may be logical enough if the game emerged from the pre-Christian society of Iron Age Ireland. The *tablut* board is marked out as a cross too, but the religious symbolism appears to be the other way round, for the king and his heroic defenders in the centre of the cross are called the Swedes, while his attackers in the arms of the cross are called the Russians.

There is a description of *brannumh* in an Irish poem of the period 1200-1640. It is employed as a metaphor to describe Tara, possession of which symbolises possession of all Ireland. "The navel of Ireland's fair plain is the ring-fort of Tara, delightful hill. There it is, out in the very centre of the plain, like a carved piece on a chequered *brannumh* board (*mar shnuighe ar bhreccláir bhrannuimh*). Go there, it will be a profitable step; leap up on that square (*suidhe*, 'seat') which is the *branán*'s point of origin (*as tí bhunaidh do bhranán*), for the board is deservedly yours. I would draw your attention, white-toothed one, to the free points basic to *branáns*."

The poet names the capitals of the five provinces of Ireland (Tara, Cashel, Cruachan, Naas and Aileach) and says, *suighter duít orra*: "may you sit on them". Then he goes on: "You and your four provincial leaders

are a golden *branán* with his warband — you, king of Bregia, on yon point, with a man on each point around you.” In every case the word behind ‘point’ is *tí*; this indicates a marking of any kind on the board, whether it be a peg-hole or a square.

In the 7th century AD, while *fidchell* and (probably) *brandub* were being enjoyed by the Gael of Ireland and Scotland, a rather different battle-game was all the rage in India. It was taken up by the Persians and the Arabs, from whose name *shah* (‘king’) we now call it *chess*. They gave it to the Turks and the Saracens, from whom it had passed into Europe by 1010, when the Count of Urgel in northern Spain left his chessmen to a convent of St Giles. It had reached England even before the Norman Conquest of 1066.

The Lewis chessmen were carved in Norway from walrus ivory between 1150 and 1170. They were discovered in a sandbank on the shore of Uig Bay in 1831. They have been described as ‘the outstanding ancient chessmen of the world’. They are actually as outstanding in quantity as in quality, consisting as they do of 78 carved figures, not to mention fourteen draughts pieces and a belt buckle. That makes four full chess-sets, lacking only 45 pawns, four rooks and a knight. It is a matter of supreme irony, then, that chess appears to be unknown in Gaelic tradition.

Next time I will introduce the game so well known in traditional Scottish Gaelic verse as *tàileasg*.

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