

So the Gaelic for chess is . . .

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I drew attention to the game known in traditional Gaelic verse as *tàileasg* or ‘tables’, and pointed out that it seems to have been a form of backgammon. Seventeenth-century English sources, such as Cotton’s “Compleat Gamester” of 1674, refer to a form of backgammon called ‘Irish’. This may very well be our game, but without precise descriptions of both *tàileasg* and ‘Irish’, we cannot be sure.

Is *tàileasg* referred to in the prose tradition? The answer appears to be yes, but not very helpfully, and not very often. For example, in volume 1 of J F Campbell’s “Popular Tales of the West Highlands” we find that in Islay in 1859 Hector MacLean took down a tale called *Rìgh Òg Easaidh Ruadh*, ‘The Young King of Assaroe’, in which the young king is described several times as playing a boardgame with some otherworld creature called the *gruagach*. The game is not named: it is just *dh’iomair iad an cluiche*, ‘they played the game’. When Campbell and MacLean got the same story from Donald Macphie in South Uist, the game was named as *tàileasg*, but with nothing to identify it further. All Campbell is able to say, as editor, is that Armstrong’s dictionary translates *taileasg* as sport, game, mirth, chess, backgammon and draughts.

Last time we met Martin Martin’s reference to a game of backgammon called *falmair mór* or ‘great traveller’ being played in Berneray by Sir Norman MacLeod in the years around 1700. Information about an Irish variant of *tàileasg* which also bore a name meaning ‘traveller’ comes from a letter written in Enniskillen on 25 April 1833 by James Macquinn to Robert Macadam. Seemingly the letter came with a parcel made up of two traditional gaming-boards and thirty gaming-pieces, half of them bearing one design and half another.

“I send these articles to you according to promise,” wrote Macquinn. “They are called the Back-gammon (or the Playing Tables) or in Irish *tamhlisc*. They are two boards, one of them not whole and the other safe as yet. They are consisting of Thirty Men; in Irish they are called *furren na tafliska*. The one half of these articles differs in stamp from the other; and the game they call *sifpin sulakh* is played in the following manner: the men divided into equal shares, the dice thrown, and no number will do but Six or One; the Six takes up One, and the Ace (or the One) sends one to the opposite end so concludes the game.”

Macquinn’s *tamhlisc* is of course our *tàileasg*. His *furren na tafliska* corresponds to our *foireann na tàilisce* or ‘backgammon warband’. His game *sifpin sulakh* is perhaps in Irish spelling *sifín siubhlach*, literally a ‘travelling wisp’. A *sifín siubhlach* or *sifín siubhail* is a wisp of straw being blown along the road, hence a wanderer. According to the dictionaries, *an sifín siubhail a chur faoi dhuine* is to urge a person on his way, to send someone on his travels. *Nach mór an sifín siubhail atá faoi?* ‘Isn’t he in a great hurry to be off?’

The phrase appears to be a standard one in Irish; coming a little closer to Enniskillen and our game, however, is its meaning as used in Donegal: *cuirfidh siad an sifín siubhail faoi*, ‘they will elect him’. In the terms of the game described by Macquinn, then, throwing a six or a one is what puts the ‘travelling straw’ under the backgammon pieces, and sets them a-moving.

Macquinn now goes on to tell of a game called *ceaslan cam*, which probably means ‘crooked castle’ — in proper Irish spelling, *caisleán cam*. This is evidently a game something like Fox and Geese — a simple type of chase game in which capture is by enclosure. Macquinn says that *ceaslan cam* ‘is played by taking 3 of both kinds in one of the boards, and if you get any of them in a line (I mean > > > thus) in any direction, you have the game. They are the oldest articles in the Kingdom . . .’

Commenting on this letter in the Irish journal “Celtica” in 1956, Seán Mac Airt from Belfast pointed out that these are ‘games within the tables’, but that it is difficult to identify them exactly with ‘Irish’, Backgammon, Tick-Tack, etc., as described in “The Compleat Gamester” — even though at least four of the games seem to be dice-games played with thirty pieces.

It is time now to take stock. In this article and the last two, I have presented a number of board-games played over a millennium and a half in Gaelic Ireland and Scotland. First of all there was a battle-game called *fidchell* or ‘wood-sense’. Then there was a mysterious one called *uanfach*, meaning perhaps ‘lasting-blow’. By the Late Middle Ages, the most popular board-game seems to have been a chasing variant of *fidchell* called *brandub*, meaning ‘raven-black’. This name turned into *brannumh*, then *brannamh*.

Although *brannamh* was clearly not chess, which is a battle-game, it resembled the latter sufficiently for the name *brannamh* to be applied to chess by the Irish writer Fr Geoffrey Keating in 1631, in his book *Trí Bior-Ghaoithe an Bháis* (The Three Shafts of Death). Life, he says, is like a game of *brannamh*. Just as the king, queen, and all the other pieces, have their proper places, so also is it with human beings in the *brannamh*-game of life — when a piece is taken it is thrown into the bag regardless of rank; when death comes all human distinctions are levelled.

This is clearly modern chess, and in fact all Keating has done is to translate into Irish one of the oldest of chess homilies, the ‘Innocent Morality’, named for the fourteenth-century pope Innocent III. Such vagueness about chess was made possible by the huge popularity in the British Isles and Ireland (from the 16th century on) of backgammon, a gambling and racing game played with counters and dice. Backgammon was known in Gaelic as *tàileasg*. As *tàileasg* simply means ‘tables’, it might be thought to refer to almost any board game, but all the evidence from Ireland and Scotland suggests that it was restricted exclusively to backgammon.

We have also met three more recent games. Two were variants of backgammon — *falmair mór*, meaning ‘big palmer’ or ‘big wanderer’, in the Western Isles, and *sifín siubhlach*, meaning ‘wandering wisp’, in Ireland. The third, *caisleán cam* or ‘crooked castle’, appears to have been a chase game, and is perhaps therefore to be seen as a descendant of *brannamh*.

So are we any nearer the answer to our question, what is the Gaelic for chess? Well, this can be tackled in three ways. First, how do traditional sources answer the question? Secondly, what do the dictionaries say? And thirdly, after all this, what do we think ourselves?

With regard to traditional sources, it seems that chess-playing is absent from the record, but that Keating was willing to use *brannamh* for chess in 1631. With regard to dictionaries, these display a grim determination to offer a traditional Gaelic name or names. Dinneen's Irish-English dictionary, which first appeared in 1904, says that *fidhcheall* or *ficheall* is chess, *brannamh* is also chess, and *táiplis* is tables, draughts or backgammon. De Bhaldraithe's English-Irish dictionary, published in 1959, says that chess is *ficheall*, draughts is *táiplis bheag* and backgammon is *táiplis mhór*. Ó Dónaill's Irish-English dictionary of 1977 says that *ficheall* is chess, *brannamh* is a board-game similar to chess, *táiplis bheag* is draughts and *táiplis mhór* is backgammon.

So far so good. If we now turn to Scottish Gaelic dictionaries, starting with Armstrong's of 1825, we find in the Gaelic-English section that *ficheall* (for some reason) is a buckle, *brannamh* (for some reason) is a coat of mail, and *taileasg* is given (as we have seen) as chess, backgammon or draughts. In his English-Gaelic section, backgammon is *taileasg*, draughts is also *taileasg*; chess is not given, but chess-man is given as *fear-feòirn*. (*Feòirn* or *feòirne*, a derivative of *foireann*, 'warband', is a word we have met repeatedly for backgammon counters.)

The Highland Society Dictionary of 1828 offers *tàileasg* as backgammon or chess, and chess is given as *tàileasg* or *cluiche fear-feòirne*; draughts is not mentioned. Mackenzie's of 1845, followed by MacLennan's of 1925 and 1979, gives *tàileasg* for chess, draughts and backgammon.

Coming to Dwelly's, Armstrong's mysterious *ficheall* 'buckle' is still there, *brannamh* is a coat of mail or a chess-man, *feòirne* is given as chess, *fear-feòirne* as a chess-man, *dàmais* (literally 'damage', I suppose!) as draughts, *tàileasg* (as usual) as backgammon, chess or draughts, *taibhleas* as backgammon, and *taibhleas beag* as draughts. Thomson's English-Gaelic dictionary of 1981 gives *tàileasg* for chess and backgammon, and *dàmais* for draughts.

Cox's "Brìgh nam Facal" of 1991 gives *dàmais* for draughts, *tàileasg* for backgammon, and — wait for it — *fidhcheall* for chess. Finally, volume one of the "Stòr-Dàta Briathrachais Gàidhlig" (1993) gives *feòirne* and *tàileasg* for chess, *taibhleas* and *tàileasg* for backgammon, and *tàileasg*, *damarod*, *dàmais* and *taibhleas beag* for draughts. *Damarod* is a new one on me, but it looks very like *dam-an-rud* — 'damn-the-thing'!

After all this, then, what do we think ourselves? Well, tradition tells us firmly that *tàileasg* is backgammon, and *dàmais* has emerged for draughts. Both of these are borrowed words. The choice for chess, on the other hand, boils down to two good Gaelic words: the ancient *ficheall* (which was not chess, but seems, like chess, to have been a battle-game); and *feòirne* or 'warband'.

What do *you* think?

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