## 7.1.3.4 Gaming board from Sector 2
## Mark Hall, Perth Museum

Catalogue extract

| Int | Find No | Context | Identity | Description | Dimensions | Stone type | Other finds from C1660 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 14 | 3932 | 1660 | ?gaming board | broken tile with 6 parallel incised lines, some multiply incised, spaced at c.20mm, crossed at one end by 3 parallel lines at c.15mm, forming partial grid | 200 x 132 x 17mm | medium to fine-grained, red, ferruginous sandstone | Several fragments of slag; whetstone (x1), animal bone assemblage |

**Unfinished graffito gaming board** (M A Hall)
This broken piece of sandstone, measuring 200x132x17mm is incised with a graffito of an unfinished grid of lines that is most likely to have been intended to serve as a gaming board design. The design comprises six parallel incised lines, some multiply incised, spaced at c.20mm intervals, crossed at one end by three parallel lines at c.15mm intervals, forming a partial grid containing ten complete or partial cells.

Although incomplete it is comparable to boards from across Scotland (Hall 2007) particularly Orkney (e.g. Buckquoy, Ritchie 1979, 198-99, the neighboring site of Red Craig house, Brundle 2004 and the nearby settlement site of Howe, Stromness, Ballin Smith 1994: 188) and Shetland (e.g. Jarlshof, Hamilton 1956: plate xxxi, no.1). The three Buckquoy farmstead examples are all incised on similar sized fragments of flagstone (2) and sandstone, measuring 190-2235x170-175x24-32mm. From the dun site of Dun Chonallaich, near Kilmartin, Argyll (Dal Riata) comes a further stone example, slightly bigger in size (Ritchie 1987: 62 and fig. 2). From a monastic context we should also note the flat beach pebble measuring 235x193x20mm, from Inchmarnock, off Bute, and incised on both sides with gridded or cellular gaming boards. Face 1 has a neat design of 6x6 cells with a distinctive central cell indicated (as per the examples already cited). Face 2 carries an erratic and unplayable design similar in appearance to the board from Jarlshof cited above (which also carries a neatly executed board on its other face). From Inchmarnock there are a further five boards with similar designs in various stages of completeness and size (from 60x50x3mm to 345x265x25mm), two of them found in reuse contexts as packing stones in a post hole and part of the lining of an early medieval grave (for a full discussion and catalogue of the boards see Ritchie 2008). The Inchmarnock boards can be

interpreted as evidence for both play by the brothers and the teaching of elite pupils as part of its school function (Hall 2011: 150).

Such boards were not confined to graffiti-on-stone examples. Perhaps the finest example of a high status board of this type is that from Ballinderry crannog, Ireland and dating to the tenth century. Made of wood and elaborately carved, it measures 249x243mm (Graham-Campbell 1980: 23; Wallace and Ò Floinn 2002: 31 and pl. 6:22). Not quite as elaborate but undoubtedly special looking when complete, is the fragment of whalebone board (like Ballinderry marked with peg-holes) from the Brough of Birsay (Curle 1982: illus. 50. 274).

As far as material, size and incompleteness go there is no objection to the example from Tarbat being an unfinished example of a board for gwyddbwyll, fidcheall and brandubh or tafl (especially hnefatafl). Arguments have been advanced recently for these respectively British, Irish and Scandinavian games as being variants derived from a common roman ancestor, Ludus Latrunculorum (Hall and Forsyth 2011). The dating and the north British, not to say Pictish, context of the Tarbat example would strongly suggest the game intended was gwyddbwyll or brandubh. The limited descriptions of gwyddbwyll suggest it may have been akin to the Irish version brandubh, which lacked the designation of special corner cells, a feature of the Scandinavian version (and also of fidcheall, probably the Irish adaptation of the Viking version). Certainty on which version was intended is not possible because it is unfinished. We might doubt the penetration of a Scandinavian variant of the game into a north British monastic context by the ninth century but this need not be a bar for the Irish variant, fidcheall, and board games are amongst the most able material culture penetrators of social and ethnic contexts.

The context and its dating have been described by the excavators as 'recovered from C1660 which was a layer overlying the 'primary burning' horizon … associated with the destruction of the 8th-century monastery (Period 2), which was followed by landscaping - including layers such as C1660 - which marks the beginning of reuse of the site in Period 3 (9th-century craft-working). This means the piece is most likely to derive from Period 2 activity.' The other finds from this context comprise animal bone, several pieces of slag and a whetstone, nothing really that sheds light on the context of use (though we might note that the board from Dun Chonallaich mentioned above had its back used as a whetstone and that a whetstone was also found with a possible whetstone, Morris 1989:156) but perhaps confirms the site destruction disturbance, interpreted as Viking attack.

As a gaming board it is significant as the first example of such from an early medieval monastic settlement in the north of Scotland, demonstrating the social spread of board games outwith the secular, domestic context signaled by the several boards from the Orkney and Shetland Isles in particular. It is also the only early monastic example from Scotland other than the large number of boards from Inchmarnock, which we can perhaps now take as typical rather than untypical of early monasteries.

References

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