A probable gaming board from Ormiston
Newburgh, Fife

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Summary

Excavations in 1978 and 1980 at Ormiston Farm revealed a hut circle with no direct dating evidence (Sherriff 1988, 99–110). Amongst the few finds recovered was an incised piece of stone found in disturbed deposits (ibid 104). It is suggested here that this stone may have been a gaming board for the game of merelles (also known as mill or morris).

Description

The stone is a basalt measuring 156mm (long) x 137mm (wide) x 76mm (thick). One surface bears an incised design of a quadrilateral approximately 96mm x 90mm (decreasing to 74mm) (see Illus 1 and 2). The corners of this near-square either cross or meet, with one line running on. The three lines of a second, larger, quadrilateral (the fourth line is absent) are incised around the first. This second quadrilateral may not have been completed or may have suffered damage. Between the two quadrilaterals (separated by a gap of approximately 14mm) are much lighter, incised lines, presumably test lines for the final design. This design is consistent with that for a gaming board.

Graffiti gaming boards

How is this suggested identification supported by known stone gaming boards?

Complete or fragmentary boards for a variety of games are recognized increasingly often among finds from archaeological sites. Examples in wood and bone are known in addition to the more common stone boards. In date, they range from the Romano-British period through to the 17th century and have a wide geographic and cultural distribution. The fullest review is still Murray (1952) though Croft (1987) provides a useful summary of recent archaeological examples. The surviving pattern on the Ormiston stone is, in gaming terms, indicative of the merelles or morris class of board games (Murray 1952, 37–50). This is a game for two players most commonly using 9, 6 or 3 playing pieces on an appropriate board of 3 ‘squares’, 2 ‘squares’ or 1 ‘square’, respectively, each with connecting lines (see Illus 3). Players alternate place one piece on to the board until all are on. The players then try to make a line (or mill) of three pieces; each mill allows the removal of an opponent’s piece. The game is lost when a player has less than the three pieces needed to make a mill.

The archaeological evidence for the game in Scotland has been reviewed (Robertson 1967, 321–3), as it has for the rest of Britain (Micklethwaite 1892, 319–28; Shireff 1953, 110–5). In recent years a number of important, additional boards have been discovered, most notably from Tintagel, Cornwall (Thorpe 1989, 70–2); Wharram Percy, Yorkshire (Beresford and Hurst 1990, pl 6); Old Sarum, Wiltshire (Saunders and Saunders 1991, 174 and fig 51); Jedburgh Abbey, Roxburgh (Gallagher 1995, 108–9); Castle Acre Castle, Norfolk (Hinton 1982, 260–1); Whithorn, Wigtownshire (Nicholson 1997, 449); and various sites on the Isle of Man (Cubbon 1960, 60–70; Freke 1985, 4 and 19). Though incised on different types of stone these boards exhibit common features: a shared use of raw material, incised graffiti designs of an ephemeral nature and a variety of stages of completion.

The Ormiston stone shares these characteristics but its interpretation as a gaming board remains problematical. Its design is less complete than usual, and to such a degree that it is impossible to say whether the ‘board’ was for nine mens morris or six mens morris. If it was for nine mens morris it would require a third, larger quadrilateral around the surviving two. The damage to the corners of the existing, outer quadrilateral indicates that some of the stone has been lost. Sherriff (1988, 104) notes indications of deliberate shaping. This could have destroyed the third quadrilateral. If the ‘board’ was for six mens morris the basic pattern is
complete, except for the absent fourth line of the outer quadrilateral. The total absence of any trace of the fourth side remains perplexing and it is not clear whether it was ever present. That said, one-off or very short-term usage may still have been possible. Similarly, the lack of cross-lines joining the squares puzzles, but is encountered elsewhere. The surviving stone benches in the cloister of Gloucester Cathedral have similarly unfinished merelles boards with no cross-lines (see Illus 3.4). Alternatively, the Ormiston board may have been left unfinished because the missing corner broke off during manufacture.

Landscape setting and context of use

If the above identification is accepted how did it come to be at Ormiston? Does its location help or hinder its interpretation?

The stone came from a disturbed area of the hut-circle wall (Illus 2). The nature of the site is generally observed to have ‘... good topsoil that has attracted arable cultivation since at least the medieval period, both the north and south-facing slopes are liberally covered with the remains of plots of ridge-and-furrow cultivation’, (ibid, 99). In addition it is observable that the stone is from a site within a rich palimpsest landscape, preserving elements of a continually re-worked occupation from the Neolithic onwards. The multi-period Clatchard Craig is immediately to the north-east (Close-Brooks 1986, 117–84); Black Cairn fort is immediately to the north-west; and Newburgh, Lindores Abbey and Denmyline Castle are found in an arc to the north and east, to name but a few sites. Stone was a readily available raw material in many contexts and was often the most expedient or economically viable resource (see Bradley 1995). Though the Ormiston hut circle could be Bronze Age in date, a later re-use coincidental with agricultural activity or the need for readily accessible stone provides a more than adequate context for the incising of one of the stones as a gaming board. If merelles is the game, as is argued, it does not appear to be known in Britain before the 11th century (Murray 1952, 41 and 44) and probably
Illus 2. Drawing of the stone gaming board from Ormiston.
arrived with the Normans. We should remember though that it was a game known to the Vikings (from whom the Normans were, of course, descended) and certainly on the Continent it is known from the Roman period (Austin 1935, 79–80; Holliger 1984, 17–8). It is currently the subject of a Europe-wide survey led by the Group d’Études de Recherches et de Sauvegarde de l’Art Rupestre [GERSAR] which may yet reveal more about the game’s chronological and cultural distribution. Given the presently accepted dating of the game of merelles in Britain, and the evidence for long-lived settlement in the Ormston area, it seems most likely that the making of this board was an act of temporary activity in the medieval period. This is not an argument that stone, the most permanent of raw materials, is ephemeral but that it could be and was used in an ephemeral way. This is not new: Atkin and Tompkins (1988, 26) convincingly inferred that the Wharram Percy nine men’s morris board resulted from short-lived recreational activity by the masons building Wharram Percy church.

**Conclusion**

This interpretation of the stone found at Ormston, as a probable gaming board, is not without its difficulties. Nevertheless, its main design elements are consistent with known stone gaming boards, particularly for the game known as mill, merelles or morris. Its ephemeral nature and casual loss or abandonment reveal both its lack of inherent value and its usefulness in passing the time. A medieval date is entirely possible and corroborated by the richness of medieval occupation in the immediate landscape around Ormston. As with many aspects of archaeology, where certainty is out of reach, so it is with the Ormston stone but the author hopes that the arguments given, if not entirely persuasive, may at least provoke alternative interpretations.
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Abstract
An incised stone found at Ormiston, Newburgh, Fife is interpreted here as a probable gaming board for the game of merelles (or morris or mill), probably of the medieval period. It is set within a broader discussion of the game and the Ormiston landscape.

Keywords: stone board, graffiti, merelles, morris, mill, gaming board, medieval