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OLD ENGLISH *CYNINGSTAN*

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OE *cyningstan* occurs once only, and so may be a nonce-word. It is one of a group of gaming terms in the eleventh-century Latin-Old English glossary of B.M. MS Add. 32246, whence it was copied in the seventeenth century into Bodleian MS Junius 71. The full gloss is *pirgus, cyningstan on tæfle*. Bosworth-Toller amend the OE form to *cynningstan* (*cenningstan* in the Supplement) which they relate to the OE verb *cennan* "try, prove." This they translate "trying-stone," glossing it as "a little wooden tower on the side of a gaming-board, hollow and having steps inside, through which the dice were thrown upon the board."

In his supplement to J. R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Cambridge, 1962), H. D. Meritt rightly returns to the gloss spelling *cyningstan*, which he translates "an instrument used in casting dice." He examines the word in detail in *Fact and Lore about Old English Words* (Stanford, 1954), pp. 134-5. Here he suggests—what is certainly most likely—that the source of the lemma *pirgus* is a famous section on gaming terms in Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, XVIII, 1x ff. Isidore defines the words *tabula, alea, pirgus* and *calculus*. Of *pirgus* (*pyrgus*) he says: "pyrgus dictus quod per eum tesseræ pergant, sive quod turris speciem habeat. Nam Græci turrem πύργον vocant." The first part of this accounts for Meritt's definition of *cyningstan*, but leaves the curious compound unexplained. Accordingly, Meritt (comparing the gloss *puplicum, cynestrate*) argues that the glossator related the lemma to MLat *pirgus* which du Cange translated *via regia*, and suggests that the OE glossator got the idea of *cyning-* from *via regia*.

There are two weaknesses in this argument: (i) the link between *pirgus* (which seems from the dictionaries to have been a fairly rare form compared with the variants *pergus, pirgius*) "*via regia*," *pirgus* "dice-box," and the element *cyning-* is tenuous; (ii) even after the first element *cyning-* is established, we must still account for *-stan*, which does not fit the meaning "dice-box." Meritt notes the second difficulty, and argues: "Since the gloss *cyningstan* occurs among terms for dicing such as *alea* [*sic*] glossed *tæfelstanas*, one may assume that the glossator thought of *pirgus* as some kind of *stān*."

The argument needs examination. I begin by quoting the Anglo-Saxon gaming glosses *in extenso* to give the context of the material.¹ The full list of terms in MS Add. 32246 is *alea, tæfel; aleæ, tæfelstanas; aleator, tæflere; pirgus, cyningstan on tæfle; tessere, uel lepusculæ, federscite tæfel*. The Épital, Erfurt and Corpus glossaries (which are related) have *alea, teblæ|tefil|tebl; aleator, teblere; cotizat, tebleth; calculus, ratio vel sententia vel: tebelstan vel lapillus|tebil[s]tan vel labillus|calculus, ratio, uel sententia, uel numerus, uel teblstan*. Erfurt has an additional *aleator, tebleri aleæ; alia, tefil*, while Leiden,

presumably deriving here from the same source, has *aleo*, *teblheri* and *alea*, *tebl*. In the mid-tenth-century Cotton Cleopatra A3 glossary are *alea*, *tæfl*; *calculus*, *tæflstan*; *aleator*, *tæflere*; *cotizo*, *ic tæfle*, *tesseris*, *tæflum*. The tenth- or eleventh-century Harley 3376 has *cotizat*, *tæflap*, and the eleventh-century Brussels, Bibliothèque royale, 1828-30 contains the group *alea*, *tæfl*; *calculus*, *tæflstan*; *aleator*, *tæflere*.

There is here the usual difficulty of assessing the value of gloss evidence for the meanings of rare words. There is also the specific problem that some of the words concerned have each several meanings.² MLat *alea* can mean "dice," but it is also a general name for a game of chance with dice, for a board game of skill involving dice, and perhaps for other kinds of board game too. Strictly speaking, *tæfl* means the board on which the game is played, then the game played on it, and finally, if the glosses *tesseris*, *tæflum* and *tessere* . . . *federscite tæfel* are accurate, the dice used in the game. If *alea*, *tæflstanas* is a valid pair, *tæflstan* also means "dice," though this is the only evidence I know for it. On the other hand, *tæflstan* glossing *calculus* must be "playing-piece, pawn." From the nature of the compound this is an equally likely meaning, and it is independently supported by an OHG gloss to Isidore's *Etymologia*, XVIII, lxxvii, *de calculorum motu*.³ *Zabilsteina* renders *inciti*, and the context shows the meaning to be clearly "playing-pieces." *Thessere* is more appropriately given by *wrfilsteina*.

Though all the OE gloss words quoted are linked to dicing, the connexion may be less explicit than Meritt's argument demands. The idea of dicing may have been remote in the glossator's mind, and he may be more concerned with the idea of board games and playing-pieces. If *tæflstan*=*calculus*= "playing-piece," it is at least likely that *cyningstan* has some connexion, through its second element, with "playing-piece," and it is then tempting to connect it with the modern word "king" in draughts or chess. *Cyningstan on tæfle* would then be "the king in a game of *tæfl*" or "the king on a gaming board." It remains to be shown whether such a piece is known from the Anglo-Saxon period, and whether *cyningstan* is an appropriate name for it.

Chequered wooden boards and playing-pieces of glass, bone, clay, etc. are known from Germanic regions from early times. In Scandinavia there are board fragments of the Roman Iron Age from Vimose, Fyn, while from the Viking Age there is the Gokstad ship specimen.⁴ From the Viking colonies in the west there is a single example, the board from Ballinderry, West Meath, Eire, whose decoration suggests that it was made in the Isle of Man in the tenth century.⁵ It has forty-nine peg holes, seven by seven, the central one marked by incised concentric circles, and the corner holes by quarter circles. There are no known Anglo-Saxon boards, but playing-pieces are common in cremation graves in East Anglia, and in a number of seventh-century inhumation burials, as at Taplow, Bucks., and Sarre and Faversham, Kent.⁶ The literary sources are not helpful as to the nature of the games played with these pieces. Anglo-Saxon literature has only general references to gaming, the most explicit being *sumum tæfle cræft|bleobordes gebregd* in *Fates of Men*, 70-1, where *bleobord* suggests the contrasting colours of the modern chequer board, and *gebregd* perhaps that the game played is one of skill or cunning rather than chance. The ON sources are a little more precise. From them we learn some details of the game *hnefatafl*. Important is one of the *Riddles of Gestumblindi*, a group of stanzas preserved in *Heiðreks saga*:

Hverjar eru þær snótir
 er um sinn drottin
 vápnlausan vega;
 inar jarpari hlifa
 um alla daga,
 en inar fegri fara

The answer is *þat er hnettaft; inar dökkri verja hnefann, en hvítar sækja*.⁷ ("Who are the ladies who fight around their defenceless lord? The darker ones defend all the time, the fairer ones advance." "It is a game of *hnefataft*. The darker ones defend the *hnefi* (=the king), the white ones attack.")

H. J. R. Murray has attempted some reconstruction of the game by reference to a sixteenth-century account of the related Welsh *tawlbwrdd* and an eighteenth-century description of the Lappish *tablut*.⁸ Though these two games differ in details, they apply common principles. Both are played between two sides of unequal strengths. The smaller occupies the middle of a chequered board, and has a king which takes the central square. The larger side fills the edges of the board. It tries to capture the king, which the smaller side defends, seeking to open up a way for the king to the edge. A game like this fits the allusion in Gestumblindi's riddle, and could be played on the Ballinderry board. The only other evidence for such a game in the British Isles in early medieval times seems to be in Corpus Christi College, Oxford, MS 122, f.5b.⁹ The manuscript is a gospel book in an Irish hand, and is dated to the later eleventh century. It contains a drawing of a squared figure like a chequer board, with pieces shown set on the corners of squares. A scatter of pieces lines the board edges, and there are two concentric groups about the central point of the board. As it stands in the manuscript, the figure is an obscure allegory referring to the Eusebian Canons, but an introduction seems to mention a genuine game, called here *alea evangelii* and said to have come from England to Ireland in the reign of Athelstan.

For a game of this sort, the playing-pieces must satisfy two requirements: one side, the attackers, must be larger than the other—the usual ratio is 2:1; one piece, the central one (=ON *hnefi*), must be distinguished from the others in some way. From the published excavation reports it is hard to tell whether the playing-pieces actually found comply with these conditions. Accounts are usually imprecise, individual pieces may be damaged or fragmentary, and sets may be incomplete. A detailed examination of all the finds of this type is needed, but even on available information a number seem of interest to the present enquiry.¹⁰ Sarre grave 198 yielded a set of low domed counters, fourteen with twin holes bored on the flat side, and twenty-six either plain or fragmentary, as well as two dice. Caistor-by-Norwich, Norfolk, urn N 59 had thirty-three pieces, about a third of them black, apparently of ivory, and two-thirds white, of bone. These suggest games with unequal sides, one twice as large as the other. Sarre grave 6 had about fifty low dome-topped pieces, some with plain tops and others decorated with punched circlets. These were of bone, but there were also two larger ones made from animal's teeth. An urn found at Shudy Camps, Cambs., had fifty-six circular pieces, and a bone object, much decayed, roughly cubic and pierced with metal.¹¹ At Keythorpe Hall, Tugby, Leics., was a set of forty-six discs and a pair of dice, together with a semi-globular object.¹² From Tuddenham, Suffolk, are twelve counters,

all plain save one which had incised cross-shaped decoration on its top. In these groups one (or two in Sarre 6) piece is differentiated from the others by size or shape or pattern, and sets from Scandinavia also show this characteristic. Perhaps relevant here is the collection of astragali, found also in urn N 59 of Caistor-by-Norwich, which are usually thought to be pieces for some sort of game. There were at least thirty-four of them, many now fire-damaged. One, being inscribed, was distinct from the rest. This too is larger than any of the ones that have survived intact.

Several finds of smaller numbers of pieces are important to the discussion. From Haslingfield, Cambs., and Castle Bytham, Lincs., are horse's teeth, rubbed or ground down at the bases and with tops carved or shaped.¹³ These may be board game pieces. From Witchampton Manor, Dorset, comes a group of chess pieces for which an Anglo-Saxon date is possible. They are of whalebone, and are tall and fairly slim—roughly double cube in proportion—with some ornamentation.¹⁴ Our glossator may have had in mind a piece of this type, used as a king in the game of *tæfl*, and equated it with *pirgus* "tower," *quod turris speciem habeat*.

But would the Anglo-Saxons call such a piece *cyningstan*? The ON name is *hnefi*, which is identical with the word meaning "fist," and could be used for the piece because it resembled slightly a clenched fist, tall and cylindrical. In *Heiðreks saga*, as we have seen, it is compared to a *drottinn* "lord, king," which links with *cyningstan*. From ME times the word "king" was certainly used in this country for the chess piece, and H. J. R. Murray suggests that chess may have been known, even if not extensively played, in late Anglo-Saxon times.¹⁵ In the *alea evangelii* the pieces (*viri*) are likened to *duces scilicet et comites, propugnatores et impugnatores*, the central, distinctive, one being called *primarius vir*, perhaps to fit the allegory of the tract. For the related Celtic game the name evidence is recorded late, though it often refers back to Dark Age times. The Irish game called *brandub* had one special piece called the *branán* "chief," while in the Welsh *tawlbwrdd* the equivalent was the *brenhin* "king," and the others were his men (*gwerin*). *Cyningstan* "king-piece," seems therefore an appropriate name for the central figure of the Anglo-Saxon game, and I suggest that Meritt's definition be amended to give this sense. Whether there is any connexion with the word *cynestan* "king-stone," preserved as far as I know only in the place-name Kingston upon Soar, Notts. (*Cynestan*, 1082), is doubtful,¹⁶ but it is not impossible that Kingston had in its neighbourhood a distinctive rock which resembled the *cyningstan* in a game of *tæfl*, and which was named after it.

NOTES

¹ Most of this material is given in T. Wright, *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, ed. R. P. Wülcker, 2nd ed. (London, 1884), cols. 4, 150, 212, 267, 295. The Épinal, Erfurt, Corpus and Leiden glossaries are in H. Sweet, *The Oldest English Texts* (London, 1885).

² The Latin words are discussed in Pauly-Wissowa, s.v. *lusoria tabula*, particularly cols. 1915-16, 1924, 1940-41.

- ³ E. Steinmeyer and E. Sievers, *Die althochdeutschen Glossen* (Berlin, 1879-1922), III, 162.
- ⁴ For details and bibliography see *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder, s.v. brettspill*.
- ⁵ H. O'Neill Hencken, "A Gaming Board of the Viking Age," *Acta Archaeologica*, IV (1933), 85-104.
- ⁶ There is a convenient list in A. Ozanne, "The Peak Dwellers," *Medieval Archaeology*, VI-VII (1962-63), 37.
- ⁷ C. Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise* (London, 1960), pp. 37-8. The texts of the different manuscripts vary somewhat, notably as to whether it is the lord or the ladies who are weaponless.
- ⁸ H. J. R. Murray, *A History of Board-games other than Chess* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 62-64. See also F. Lewis, "Gwerin ffristial a thawlbrwdd," *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1941), 185-205.
- ⁹ J. A. Robinson, *The Times of Saint Dunstan* (Oxford, 1923), pp. 69-71, 171-81.
- ¹⁰ I wish to thank Mrs S. C. Hawkes and Miss Barbara Green for some of the information which follows. The Tuddenham and Haslingfield pieces, which are unpublished, are in the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.
- ¹¹ T. C. Lethbridge, *A Cemetery at Studly Camps, Cambridgeshire* (Cambridge, 1936), p. 23.
- ¹² *Archaeological Journal*, XVIII (1861), 76.
- ¹³ *Archaeological Journal*, X (1853), 82.
- ¹⁴ O. M. Dalton, "Early Chessmen of Whale's Bone excavated in Dorset," *Archaeologia*, LXXVII (1927), 77-86.
- ¹⁵ H. J. R. Murray, *A History of Chess* (Oxford, 1913), pp. 404, 419-20.
- ¹⁶ For the interchange of *cyning-* and *cyne-* see A. H. Smith, *English Place-name Elements* (Cambridge, 1956), I, 123.