

An Arab Game in the North Pole? /

Thierry Depaulis

The impressive so far unpublished or very little known material that is presented in the preceding pages show one evidence: the Sámi game *sáhkku*, the Norwegian and Danish games *daldøs* and *daldosa*, and the *táb* group of games in the Islamic world belong to the same category of games, those that I call ‘race games with direct capture’. They share so many common features that one is led to wonder about the possible links between the Nordic games and the Arab-Muslim ones. In other words did *daldøs(a)* and *sáhkku* come from the Muslim world, or the other way round? Or are they independent inventions?

Let us consider first the Sámi (Lapp) game. Alan Borvo has three hypotheses regarding the origin of *sáhkku*: a) the Viking track; b) the Pomor track; c) the Kvaen track. I do not think the last two are likely since a borrowing from the Russian Pomors or from the Finnish Kvaens would mean that *sáhkku* would have been the prototype of the Norwegian and Danish games, a direction that is hard to follow. *Sáhkku* clearly appears to be an offshoot of *daldøs(a)*, rather than the contrary. That the Sámi game was borrowed from a Scandinavian model is evidenced by the many common features *sáhkku* shares with *daldøs(a)*: same general shape, same basic rules, *same very special dice*. As Borvo himself states, the Viking track is “the most satisfactory hypothesis”.

Even if the “king”, *sáhkku*’s most original feature, is “a pure Sámi addition to the *daldøs(a)*-type games” (Borvo), it obviously draws on the Scandinavian culture: its very name (*gonagas*) is derived from the Norwegian *konge*, “king”.⁽¹⁾ And Borvo remarks: “The presence of the king and king’s sons in *sáhkku*, in relationship to the old Viking *hnefatafl* ones, seems to be another favourable argument.”

We are lucky to know two representatives of this Scandinavian prototype: *daldosa* in Norway and *daldøs* in Denmark. One may be surprised to find them at such a long distance from Lappland: even the Norwegian game is known in southern Norway only, that is 1,300 km far from the Sámi land. But this, I think, is not a problem: not only *daldøs(a)* may have had a wider distribution at an earlier stage,⁽²⁾ but these games seem to have been spread by sailors from coast to coast, which would explain long-distance travels.

We may assume that the Scandinavian peoples formerly knew a three-row *táb*-type game of which only *daldøs* and *daldosa* have survived long enough to leave traces. Both games show a remarkable similarity with their Arab counterparts. If we do not take into account the random generators – two or three prismatic four-sided dice with more or less pyramidal ends in Northern Europe, from three to eight stick-dice in the Middle-East and North Africa – and the materials – which vary from wooden board and pegs to simple lines and holes traced on the ground, with matches and pebbles as gamepieces –, the games are basically the same. And it is not difficult to find an exact equivalent to *daldøs(a)* in the large family of *táb* games. My own contribution shows that three-row games are common in North Africa (see “I.2. Parcours à 3 rangées”).

So the question is: where did the Scandinavian peoples get their three-row ‘race games with direct capture’ from? It is tempting to answer: from the Arab-Muslim world where *tâb* games of all kinds are so widespread. However, when games travel they generally go from an area to another but they need direct (or semi-direct) contacts; or at least a chain of contacts.

In this case one thing is striking: we have no trace whatsoever of any *tâb*-type game in Europe. ⁽³⁾ So we have to suppose these games were borrowed from direct (or semi-direct) contacts between a Northern – actually Scandinavian – people and the Arab-Muslim world. The only period and the only historical opportunity for the Scandinavian and Islamic worlds to have been in close contact for a long while was in Viking times when the so-called Varangians – or ‘eastern’ Vikings, mostly from Sweden – settled in what is now Russia and, following the Volga and Dnieper rivers, went to the Black Sea, serving as mercenaries for the Byzantine Empire (the “Varangian guard”) and trading with the Khazars and the Arabs as well. These times took place roughly between the mid-9th century and the late 11th century.

While Viking expansion in the West was mainly driven by Danes and Norwegians, the Swedes turned themselves to the Baltic area and the Slavic hinterland. By the 2nd half of the 9th century they had founded Novgorod, and one Rurik is said to have built up the ‘Rus’ state. From Kiev, which they took for their capital city, the ‘Rus’ went further south, along the Dnieper river and met not only the Byzantines but also Arab and Khazar merchants who were trading around the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.

Since 860 the Vikings had been trying to conquer Constantinople many times. In 911 a treaty was signed between Byzantium and the ‘Rus’: recognizing the fighting qualities of the Scandinavians the Byzantine Emperor recruited them as mercenaries to form his personal guard. From then on the Greek sources call them ‘Varangians’ (Greek Βαργγιοι) a word whose exact meaning is not fully understood. ⁽⁴⁾

While these Varangian soldiers fought on behalf of the Byzantines against Byzantium’s enemies, other Swedes, journeying south from Russia, followed other routes directly east to the lands of the Volga Bulgar tribes, the rich Khazar kingdom (7th-10th century) – north of the Caucasus, between the Don and the Volga rivers – and up to Baghdad. Although direct contacts between the Scandinavians and the Arabs seem to have been scarce, the Varangians were extremely fond of Abbasid silver coins they brought back to their native country in large numbers. Beside Byzantine and Arab sources the most spectacular evidence of the Varangian wanderings is given by the many Islamic coin hoards that are to be found in Scandinavia: about 70,000 Arab silver *dirhems* have been unearthed in Sweden, while over 5,000 have been found in Denmark and a few hundred in Norway (Kromann & Roesdahl 1996: 15). Not surprisingly Byzantine coins are in much smaller numbers: the Varangians hoarded the Abbasid coins but spent their pays in Greek currency buying goods – silk, jewels and other luxury items – in Byzantium (Morrisson 1981: 136). During the 11th century this eastern trade declined and the flow of Arab coins dries up; from 1066 to the end of the century the Viking element seems to fade out in the region, and by the turn of the century the “Varangian guard” does not comprise any more Scandinavian mercenaries.

What is important in this story is not only the Viking presence in the East, it is also the travels back to Scandinavia. Indeed most of the Vikings who went as far south as the Abbasid Caliphate returned home. One of the best documented single adventures is that of Haraldr Hardráði (1015-1066), who became a notable commander of the “Varangian guard”, campaigned in Sicily, Italy and Bulgaria for several years, went back to Norway in 1047 and took over the throne, fighting against Denmark until his death at York while trying to conquer England (Haywood 1996: 124-5). Not only coin hoards, but runic inscriptions in Scandinavia attest these travels back to homeland.

So direct contacts did exist between the Vikings and the Arabs, but since the main settlement of Scandinavian people, apart from Russia, was within the Byzantine Empire, where the Varangians seem to have formed a significant community between 911 and 1066, it may be assumed that it is there that the Vikings learnt to play an Arab game before bringing it back to Scandinavia.

We have no evidence of *tâb* in the Islamic world before the early 14th century but this does not mean it did not exist in earlier times. It is quite sensible to imagine the game was known to the Arabs as far back as the 10th century. And it is not unreasonable to accept that the Islamic game was introduced to Byzantium, like chess whose introduction was assigned to the ‘Assyrians’ by Anna Komnenos in 1148 (*Alexias* VI 3,1).

Judging from what are now *daldos*, *daldosa* and even *sáhkku*, we can conclude that the Nordic basic game was modelled on a three-row simple prototype. Was this game known to the Byzantines? It is impossible to say, but it may reasonably be assumed that an earlier three-row form predated the later four-row games that are popular in the Near-East, at least since the 17th century (Hyde).

If this “Varangian” hypothesis is attractive, it is difficult to prove. No written or archaeological evidence of such a game has been brought out from Byzantium, of which we know so little as far as mind games are concerned, or from Russia. (But the latter is not necessary: the Varangians may have brought their ‘treasures’ back home without leaving traces of them along the Dnieper.) Moreover, *tâb* games are made of very ephemeral material: wood in Northern Europe, sand and twigs in the Near-Eastern and North-African examples. How could they leave any lasting traces?

However, more important objections can be made to the theory. One is that most of the Varangians were Swedes whereas *daldos(a)* has only been recorded in Denmark and Norway. But in Viking times these frontiers were not as pronounced as they are today. Danes, and even Norwegians, may have participated in Varangian raids to the South, while Swedes mixed with their Western brothers to raid the Atlantic coasts. We also have evidence of links between the Danes and Byzantium. The Danish kings were so impressed by the Byzantium coinage that they struck their coins copying Byzantine models. According to Cécile Morrisson (Morrisson 1981), the Emperor Basil II’s *miliaresion* was imitated in Denmark in the early 11th century. As we have seen Islamic coins have been found by thousands in Denmark too, although they are supposed to have come through Sweden.

But we need not search any direct connection between Denmark and Byzantium. It has been clearly shown that the Danish, Norwegian, and Sámi games all have very coastal

locations. Borvo underlines “the remarkable present geographical concentration of the game in the Arctic shores of Troms and Finnmark”, while Næsheim and Michaelsen insist too on the maritime settlement of their respective games. The boat-shape and peg-system features of *daldøs* and *daldøsa* add to the argument: they clearly signal a sailors’ coast-to-coast diffusion. Such a route, starting from southern Sweden and spreading to Jutland and south-west Norway is simple to imagine. This would explain why the game seems to be unheard of in inland Scandinavia.

Another difficulty is the still undocumented immense time-gap between Viking times and the earliest references to any of the Nordic games. These appear to be quite late: some *sábkku* words were published in 1841 but a full description had to wait for J.A. Friis’s *Lappisk mytologi, eventyr og folkesagn* of 1871. The earliest allusion to *daldøs* is mentioned in Espersen’s *Bornholmsk ordbog*, written by 1856 (published in 1908), and the first clear reference to the game is to be found in J.P. Jacobsen’s novel *Fru Marie Grubbe* of 1876 (Michaelsen, this vol.). For Norwegian *daldøsa*, a first note about it appeared in 1968, but it is essentially Alf Næsheim’s first article in 1990 which really publicized it.

All this would seem to be ridiculously late if local traditions would not unanimously date back to the early 19th century. There is no reason to dismiss them, specifically when one considers the crude aspect of the games. More crucial is the case of Bornholm, a Danish island south of Sweden, where the game had already died out by the mid-19th century when the linguist J.S.C. Espersen (1812-1859) collected the saying *spilla daldøs* (“to lose one’s possession by speculation”). This means the game had been known there from long ago. The same may have happened in many other parts of Scandinavia without even leaving any trace. It is nevertheless interesting to note the geographical situation of Bornholm, so close to Sweden (see map p. 39).

Lastly, and probably more consistently, there is the Danish-Norwegian word *daldøs(a)*. Although I don’t think it offers any clue towards the geographical origin of the game, it clearly points to an early, “medieval” but post-Viking, existence of the game in Scandinavia. According to Michaelsen *daldøs* is made out of two words: *dal* + *døs*. He relates *døs* to Old French *deus* (“two”), explaining it as a Danish borrowing from Middle Low German *dus*, itself derived from the French. The second term, *dal*, is more obscure, but may be explained in the light of an old English word *daly* whose meaning was “knucklebone”, “small piece of bone”, whence “die”. It is hard to believe that *dal* is derived from English: the other direction seems more reasonable because of the strong influence of Viking culture on the Anglo-Saxon (or Old English) language.

Traditional recreations evolved very slowly, and most of the games that were recorded in the 19th century, at least in the first half of it, have been in existence for centuries. Modern times have seen few inventions before c.1850. So, even if we have only late accounts, we can confidently assign *daldøs* a longer life than a few centuries.⁽⁵⁾ In all case it is not unwise to suppose *daldøs* was played in the 17th century as Jacobsen assumed – probably with serious reasons – in his novel.

* * *

There are, however, alternative hypotheses that we have to consider now.

Another possibility for contacts between the Arabs and the Vikings is the Norman kingdom of Sicily. Sicily had been taken by the Arabs in 827; in 1071 Robert Guiscard, a Norman lord, landed there and took over the island. The Normans were so pleased with the refined Muslim culture that they kept it alive. By doing so they might have found a *tâb* game too. The problem is that Normans were no more “Vikings”. They had lost contact with Scandinavia and actually came from French Normandy. They loved the Mediterranean so much they never returned, even to France.

Connections between the Western Vikings and Islamic Spain, did exist too, particularly in the 9th century when the Vikings raided Seville and many other places on the Iberian coasts. Even diplomatic relations were established between the Emir of Cordoba and a Danish king in the mid-9th century. But these contacts were quite sporadic and mostly military. They have left hardly any traces in the Scandinavian culture (Kromann & Roesdahl 1996: 12-15).

Of course relationships between Scandinavia and the Islamic world persisted after 1100. Crusaders and pilgrims from Northern Europe visited the Holy Land, but these were mostly individual people whose contacts with the local population must have been very scattered, much like that of modern tourists. And if a Near-Eastern game had been remarked and adopted by some of these Christian “visitors,” why the French, German and English who were by far in greater numbers had not brought the game back to their homelands?

Peter Michaelsen reminds us also of the Barbary corsairs from North Africa who ventured to raid the Atlantic coasts and went as far north as Scandinavia, capturing “many inhabitants of Denmark, Norway, Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Ireland as slaves”. But this seems a very unlikely way of importing a game. Most of these captured people were humiliated and did everything to escape, unless they were simply ransomed; they generally hated everything Muslim. Even games probably. Those who liked it, chose to convert to Islam, winning more freedom in the process, and stayed there.

Lastly we must mention another theory which points to Vandal migrations. As Peter Michaelsen remarks three-row ‘race games with direct capture’ are mainly to be found in Northern Africa. He points out similarities between *daldos* and a game from Tidikelt, Central Algeria (see “Sik 2 de Tidikelt”, in section I.2. of my contribution) which both share not only three rows but also an extra hole in the central row. There are other comparable points between some North-African and Nordic games which may be accidental but it is true that the Middle-East has only four-row games, some with the “piling” option. This may lead to the conclusion that *daldos* comes from North Africa. It is at this point that the Vandals enter. The Vandals were a people from Scandinavia who, starting from Jutland or North-East Germany around 400 AD, invaded the Roman Empire, crossed Gaul and Spain in 409-410, then sailed to Northern Africa in 429 and conquered most of Tunisia which they ruled until 534. From their African kingdom the Vandals raided the Mediterrean islands taking over Sardinia, Corsica, Sicily, and sacked Rome in 455. But, like their later successors the Normans, the Vandals never returned to their northern homeland. So the only serious hypothesis we can retain here would be the introduction of a Vandal ‘race game with direct capture’ to Northern Africa and its

possible later spread to other neighbouring countries once placed under Islamic rule. This is not only difficult to believe but it is still harder to explain how the same game could have reached Scandinavia proper, which the Vandals had left a long time ago when they started their migration through Europe. Lastly this theory assigns to *táb* games a much greater antiquity than is usually accepted.

Far from being mere speculation the “Varangian theory” seems to be the most solid one. Let us sum it up. A ‘race game with direct capture’, in a simple, ancestral three-row form was in existence in the Eastern Mediterrean region, probably in the Islamic world, by the 10th century at least. (At this point we have no clue to where the game came from.) Like chess, it was borrowed by the Byzantines from the Arabs. When the Vikings arrived, either as mercenaries – the so-called Varangians – or as merchants, they discovered the game, liked it and brought it back – with thousands of Arab silver coins, Oriental jewels and silk – to their homeland. This must have taken place before 1100, when Viking contacts with the South-East ceased. At a much later stage, the game was passed on to the Sámit who improved it by adding a king, and even sometimes two extra king’s sons, in the obvious aim to speed up an otherwise very slow game.

References

- Blöndal, Sigfús 1978. *The Varangians of Byzantium*, transl., revised and rewritten by B.S. Benedikz, Cambridge.
- Graham-Campbell, James, ed. 1994. *Cultural atlas of the Viking world*, New York: 195-8.
- Haywood, John 1996. *Atlas des Vikings 789-1100*, French ed. revised by R. Boyer, Paris; original ed. *The Penguin historical atlas of the Vikings*, Harmondsworth, 1995.
- Kromann, Anne, and Roesdahl, Else 1996. The Vikings and the Islamic lands, In: *The Arabian journey: Danish connections with the Islamic world over a thousand years*, Århus (exhibition catalogue): 9-17.
- Morrisson, Cécile 1981. Le rôle des Varanges dans la transmission de la monnaie byzantine en Scandinavie, In: *Les pays du Nord et Byzance*, R. Zeitler, ed., Uppsala / Stockholm: 131-140.

Notes

1. According to Linnaeus’s description in 1732, the central square of the *tablut* board was called *konakis* “throne”.
2. Among the gaming pieces found at Trondheim, Norway, some are strangely reminiscent of *sáhkku* pieces: see C. McLees, *Games people played...*, Trondheim, 1990: p. 233 #FA633 N36168 (“Obelisk-shaped object...”, 12th century), p. 235 #FF665 N27171 (“Carved antler piece”, 13th century).
3. But see Peter Michaelsen’s report of a possible “*daldos*” board drawing in a 13th-century English manuscript.
4. Arab sources say *warank*, Scandinavian ones have *veringjar*.
5. It is difficult to draw any conclusion from Johannes Scheffer’s reference (in *Lapponia*, Frankfurt, 1673) to the special dice with *sáhkku* signs he observed among the Lapps. The author did not relate them to any boardgame.