

Tabula at Rumwoldstow

Early mediaeval backgammon in an Anglo-Saxon monastery

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Updated January 2023 with mention of Verquere and Swedish Tables

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Introduction

Rumwoldstow¹ is a fictional monastery of women in the kingdom of Anglo-Saxon Mercia during the early tenth century AD, created as part of a living history / historical re-enactment project. In our attempt to describe daily life for the nuns we considered recreation and board games which led me to investigate early mediaeval versions of backgammon.

In this article, I review the source material and previous analyses, and suggest rules for backgammon-style games, known as *tabula*, which may have been played at Rumwoldstow.

Did Anglo-Saxons nuns play *tabula*?

Were games resembling backgammon known to the Anglo-Saxons, and to monastic women in particular?

There is evidence for the playing of dicing games on a board, and these games generally take the form of the Roman ancestor of backgammon, *alea* or *tabula*.

Sarah Foot tells us that Gregory of Tours (30 November c. 538 – 17 November 594 AD) gave an account of the abbess of Poitiers, who had been summoned before her bishop to answer a variety of charges of wrong-doings:²

‘As to the *tabulae* she used to play during the lifetime of the Lady Radegund, she saw nothing wrong in it, and it was not expressly forbidden in the Rule, or in the canons.’³ *Tabula* or *alea* (a board-game similar to backgammon, involving both skill and chance) was certainly known in Anglo-Saxon England, although finds of the boards are rare.

Foot also says:

In the so-called ‘Canons of Edgar’, an early-eleventh-century text attributed to Wulfstan, clergy were reminded ‘a priest should be neither a hunter nor a hawk nor a player of games, but should occupy himself with his books as his office requires’.⁴ One of the Vercelli homilies also warned against ‘worthless speech, gaming and gatherings’ (*idele spæca & tæflunga geboeorscipas*).⁵

Martha Bayless⁶ quotes a number of Anglo-Saxon and early mediaeval authors who wrote about *alea* as a dice game played on a board. These include Alhelm⁷ (639 – 709 AD) who wrote⁸:

aleator calculis et tesseris ludens per aleam

1 <https://www.rumwoldstow.org/>

2 Foot, Sarah. *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England, c. 600–900*. Cambridge University Press, 2006, p242.

3 Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, X. 16 (ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, MGH, SSRM I. 1, p.248)

4 ‘Canons of Edgar’, 65 (C&S I, 334-5)

5 Homily for Monday in Rogationtide, in Donald Scragg (ed.). *The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts*, EETS 300 (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1992). pp. 315-26, line 88.

6 Bayless, Martha. *Alea, Tæfl, and Related Games: Vocabulary and Context*, in *Latin Learning and English Lore*, ed. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe and Andy Orchard, 2 vols., vol. II, pp. 9–27. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. ISBN 0-8020-8919-4

7 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aldhelm>

the alea-player playing alea with counters and dice

Bayless also quotes the Chronicle of Ramsey Abbey in 991 AD ⁹:

dum alealis tabulae tessera nutat

while the die of the alea board tumbles

And finally Bayless quotes the Irish teacher Sedulius Scottus¹⁰ in the mid-ninth century AD¹¹:

a quodam ludo qui alea uocatur aleae dicunter ubi sunt duae tabulae et multae tesserae

aleae [dice] are so-called from a game which is called alea, where there are two boards and several dice

The reference to two boards reflects the fact that his game was played on a hinged board, like modern backgammon, and confirms *alea*'s identity as our backgammon-style dice game.

The fourteenth century manuscript Royal 13 A XVIII describes a *tabula* variant called "Ludus Anglicorum" (the English game).¹² I suggest that the Norman French author of this MS encountered this variant as a game known in England that may date to before the Norman conquest.

Our best evidence for the early medieval game board is the stunning Gloucester *tabula* set. This was found in Gloucester and dates to around 1100 AD. The counters are in the Romanesque style of the Normans, but the highly decorative carved bone plates which decorate the board are described by Stewart as being Viking in artistic style, with elements of the Borre, Ringerike and Urnes styles:¹³

As there is very little trace of saxon influence, it can be easily assumed that the board is more viking in origin. However, England had long been settled by viking invaders with viking kings Svein (d.1014) and Cnut (d.1035).

Although the Ringerike style was known in England before the norman conquest, the Urnes style was not generally in use until after the conquest, and it is likely that the board was not constructed until the last decades of the eleventh century, possibly c.1100...the board was likely to have been made for a norman patron...likely to have been built in England, possibly by an anglo-scandinavian (?itinerant) craftsman...

There are 30 gaming counters in the Gloucester set; half were made from red deer skull and the other half from red deer antler, giving 15 pieces per side, although the visual difference is subtle. The board can be reconstructed to match the modern layout with two sets of 12 'points'.

Although the board is in Viking artistic styles, not Anglo-Saxon, this does reflect how widespread *tabula* must have been by the time of the Norman conquest.

8 De pedum regulis: Rudolf Ehwald, ed. Aldhelmi Opera, MGH, Auct. antiq. 15 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1919), c. 120, p. 164.

9 Chronicon Abbatiae Rameseiensis, ed. W. Dunn Macray (London: Longman, 1886), 91.

10 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sedulius_Scottus

11 Grammatici Hibernici Carolini Aevi IV, ed. B. Löfstedt, CCSL 40C (Turnhout: Brepols, 1977), 94; cf. Grammatici Hibernici Carolini Aevi I, ed. L. Holtz, CCSL 40 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1977), 69.

12 Royal 13 A XVIII, British Library

<https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=6547&CollID=16&NStart=130118>

13 Stewart, Ian J. The Gloucester Tabulae set : its discovery and interpretation. Doctoral thesis. University of Bristol, 1993. Vol 1, p88.

https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/34486695/260261_vol1.pdf

A seventh century AD gaming piece suitable for *tabula* or *ludus latruncolorum*¹⁴ was found in the royal complex at Lyminge, Kent in 2013. *Tabula* pieces must be relatively flat disks so that they can be stacked, unlike for example *hnefatafl* pieces which are typically taller and likely to have a rounded top. The Lyminge piece is beautifully constructed from a bone cylinder with end caps held on by a copper alloy rivet.



Figure 1: 7th Century AD gaming piece from Lyminge, Kent.

<http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/lyminge/page/4/>

Although the abbess of Poitiers was in continental Europe and a few hundred years before our time, this is good evidence that monastic women played board games. Edgar's cannons are a little later, but the Vercelli homilies are thought to have been compiled in the late tenth century, putting their creation well within our time frame. Monastic women were often aristocratic, or wealthy widows, so would have encountered board games before taking the veil. And we have seen that *alea* or *tabula* was well known in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

I conclude that at least some educated nuns played popular board games, though gambling was discouraged.

The humble nuns of Rumwoldstow would likely have played on a simple wooden board with bone or wood pieces and perhaps bone dice. The board may have been hinged, though this would require metal fittings. A cup is more likely to have been used as a shaker, than an elaborate dice tower.

14 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludus_latruncolorum

What did the Anglo-Saxons call their game of *tabula*?

We begin by considering the Roman games and terminology, as *tabula* was introduced via the Roman empire.

It is generally thought that the earlier Roman game *Ludus duodecim scriptorum* (the game of twelve inscriptions) was played on boards with three rows of twelve markings; this game fell out of use before the time of Rumwoldstow. The name *tabula* seems to have referred to the later boards with only two rows.¹⁵

By the fourth century it was common to use *alea* to mean the board-game, usually in conjunction with the word *tabula*. In the early seventh century, Isidore of Seville (c. 560 – 636 AD) wrote a series of entries in his etymological encyclopedia *Origines* which begin¹⁶:

DE TABVLA. Alea, id est lusus tabulae, inventa a Graecis in otio Troiani belli a quodam milite Alea nomine, a quo et ars nomen accepit. Tabula luditur pyrgo, calculis tesserisque.

Alea literally means “chance” or “uncertainty” but is used to mean dice, as in Julius Caesar’s famous line “alea iacta est” (the die is cast). *Tabula* literally means board, but is used to mean a board game. The standard translation assumes that Isidore is telling us two names for the same game:

The gaming board. Dicing (alea), that is, the game played at the gaming-board (tabula), was invented by the Greeks during lulls of the Trojan War by a certain soldier named Alea, from whom the practice took its name. The board game is played with a dice tumbler¹⁷, counters, and dice.

However, Ulrik Schädler argues that Isidore is instead clarifying that he means the game of dice on a board, not just any game of dice:¹⁸

Alea, I mean the board game...

It is commonly believed that Isidore gave us further terms relating to *tabula* in his subsequent entries which tell us that the Greek word for “tower” is πύργος (pýrgos); a dice tower was used to ensure a fair throw. He also tells us that the counters move along the tracks laid out on the board as if along paths, and that some are moved in “order” or “ranks”, some “vaguely” or “dispersedly”, and some cannot be moved at all.

If he is talking about *tabula*, he must be referring to the pieces by their current situation on the board; Austin interprets *ordinarios* as which are on the same point as at least one other and cannot be taken, *vagos* as those which are isolated and vulnerable, and *incitos* as those of either type which are blocked from moving by the opponent’s pieces or perhaps restrictions against bearing off.

However, Schädler suggests:

15 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludus_duodecim_scriptorum

16 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*. Vol XVIII, DE BELLO ET LVDIS. LX.
<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/isidore/18.shtml>
<https://sfponline.org/Uploads/2002/st%20isidore%20in%20english.pdf>

17 From the Greek πύργος, “tower”

18 Ulrich Schädler, *XII Scripta*, Alea, Tabula -- New Evidence for the Roman History of "Backgammon"

the terms could also refer to the *ludus latruncularum*, that is to the pieces that in the starting phase of the game had to be placed on any place on the board (*vage*), the pieces on the board moving in rank or file (*ordine*) and finally the pieces trapped between two enemy stones that cannot move (*inciti*).

I do not think it is certain that Isidore was referring to *tabula*, but it is clear that games of dice played on tables were popular.

Moving on to Old English, the author of *Maxims I* in the Exeter Book says:

A scyle þa rincas gerædan lædan

ond him ætsomne swefan;

næfre hy mon tomælde,

ær hy deað todæle.

Hy twegen sceolon tæfle yombsittan, þenden him hyra torn toglide,

forgietan þara geocran gesceafta, habban him gomen on borde¹⁹

The warriors must always carry gear and sleep together. Never may they be hindered by slander, before they are parted by death. The two must sit at the gameboard, until their anger glides from them, forget their sad happenings, have for themselves a game on the board²⁰

The Exeter Book was written in the latter half of the tenth century, though the *Maxims* may have been composed several hundred years earlier.²¹ This passage tells something of the place of board games in society; we may speculate that board games could similarly form part of the community-building in a monastery.

This is a good time to consider the origin of the word “backgammon”. Alexander Auer suggested that the classical game was originally played on counting boards and was therefore known as the “abacus game” which became “backgammon” via “abaque gammon”, a hybrid of the French and Old English words. However most writers consider that “backgammon” is from the Middle English, “baec gammon” or “back game”, which is usually taken to refer to the pieces travelling “back home” though I think this may instead refer to a piece being sent back to the beginning of its journey after a “hit”. The word “backgammon” first appears in print in 1647, several hundred years after Norman French fell out of use in England, which weakens the case for Auer’s theory.²² In either case, the word “backgammon” does not appear to have been in use in the early mediaeval period.

19 <https://web.archive.org/web/20040620201356/http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/library/oe/texts/a3.13.html>

20 Friedrich, Matthias and Harland, James M. Interrogating the ‘Germanic’: A Category and its Use in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 23 Nov 2020
<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ancGEAAQBAJ&pg=PT358&lpg=PT358&dq=Hy+twegen+sceolon+t%C3%A6fle+yombsittan&source=bl&ots=8EMkhqkXv0&sig=ACfU3U07Oso00yIWErTB6oyO76WtXwcTxg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjX4p684MLzAhUREcAKHUksDRsQ6AF6BAgbEAM#v=onepage&q=Hy%20twegen%20sceolon%20t%C3%A6fle%20yombsittan&f=false>

21 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maxims_\(Old_English_poems\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maxims_(Old_English_poems))

22 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/backgammon>

Bayless tells us that there was general confusion of terms but that educated Anglo-Saxons used *alea* as the term for all board and dice games and *tabula* for the gaming-board. In Old English they used *tæfle* for the game, and *tæflstan* for the pieces. We will learn later that there were many variants of *tabula* by the thirteenth century and our nuns may well have specified the name of a particular game, e.g.: “Shall we play *Ludus Anglicorum?*”, “No, I’d rather play *Pyfl*”. We do not know the actual names of the games played in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms; the names I have given to the reconstructed games presented later in this article are inventions.

The Classical game

As previously mentioned, Alexander Auer suggested that the game developed from the counting board (known as abacus) and its counters or ‘calculi’, i.e. stones for counting.²³ The connection of classical games of dice with the abacus is also made by Steward Culin.²⁴ I have not been able to verify his claim that the Roman counting board had six lines, for the ones, fives, tens, fifties, hundreds and thousands, all mirrored for subtractions, but I have found images online of reconstructed Roman counting boards that feature two sets of stones in different colours. Overall, the idea seems plausible, and it would make sense for a “gaming abacus” to become standardised to fit the number of faces of the standard cubical dice. *XII Scripta* and *tabula* boards have multiples of six divisions.

We can learn something about the game from classical authors.

In book X of the Republic, Plato (~428 – 348 BC) advises us on how to deal with affliction;

To deliberate about what has happened to us, and, as it were in the fall of the dice, to determine the movements of our affairs with reference to the numbers that turn up, in the way that reason indicates would be the best.²⁵

In his life of Pyrrhus²⁶, Plutarch (46 AD –after AD 119) says:

For this reason Antigonus used to liken him to a player with dice who makes many fine throws but does not understand how to use them when they are made.²⁷

This passage is noteworthy because it refers to Antigonus I Monophthalmus²⁸, and we will encounter *Antigonus* in Zeno’s game.

From Plato and Plutarch, we can conclude that there was a game, well known in Ancient Greece, in which the course of play was to throw the dice, consider how to best use the numbers, and then make your move.

Nonius Marcellus (4th or 5th century AD), quoting Cicero’s lost Hortensius of 45 BC, says:

23 <https://note.com/bgmochy/n/n5f5cc1174554>

Alexander Auer, 2012

24 Culin Stewart. Chess and Playing Cards, Catalogue of Games and Implements for Divination exhibited by the United States National Museum in connection with the department of archaeology and paleontology of the University of Pennsylvania at the Cotton States and International Exposition, Atlanta, Georgia, 1895. p832.

25 <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168%3Abook%3D10>

26 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pyrrhus>

27 https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Pyrrhus*.html

28 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antigonus_I_Monophthalmus

Itaque tibi concedo, quod in duodecim scriptis solemus, ut calculum reducas, si te alicuius dati poenitet.²⁹

So I allow you, as we do in the twelve inscriptions, to take back your move if there is one you repent of having played.

A practical interpretation is that you could take back (and reconsider) your move so long as the other player has not rolled the dice – this is almost our only clue to specific gameplay in *XII scripta*.

Ovid (43 BC – 17/18 AD), writes:

Est genus, in totidem tenui ratione redactum

Scriptula, quot menses lubricus annus habet:

Parva tabella capit ternos utrimque lapillos,

In qua vicisse est continuasse suos.³⁰

There is a kind [of game] brought by a subtle method to as many little written things as the slippery year has months: the little board holds three pebbles on both sides, and on this board - to have won - you have to have joined up your [pebbles].³¹

I think Ovid is writing about two different games; one with twelve divisions, and another in which each player has three pieces that they must align³². This seems to me consistent with his discussion of a variety of games in *Tristia* book II: 471-496³³ in which he seems to refer in turn to knucklebones, *tabula*, *ludus latrunculorum*, and then again to the game which may equate to three men's morris. While often quoted, I think we cannot learn more from Ovid than that there was a popular game board divided into twelve parts.

It is generally assumed that the game with twelve divisions is played on the boards with three rows of twelve divisions or letters each that are commonly identified as boards for *XII Scripta*, the game of twelve inscriptions. Twelve divisions is a fair description of the board; if you divide your board into twelve columns, you may then draw two horizontal lines to create three rows of twelve spaces each, and there seems no other game it could be. Ulrich Schädler takes the view that we know very little about the Roman game except that the Romans seem to have enjoyed an association with text, while the Greek game seems to have become abstract earlier on.³⁴

Schädler identifies what he considers to be transitional boards, such as one reused as a revetment of a fountain in the *Domus del Ninfeo*, Ostia, in the 4th century AD, which appear to have been cut down from a three row board to two rows by removing the top row. He suggests that the transition from the thirty six to the twenty four point game seems to have occurred between around 250 and

29 <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0063:id=duodecim-scripta-cn>

30 Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* III, verse 365

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0068%3Atext%3DArs%3Abook%3D3>

31 Katie Hambrook, personal communication

32 It seems likely this game is “three men's morris”, possibly also played on circular boards found at Roman sites.

<https://www.alamy.com/an-unknown-roman-game-carved-into-the-floor-of-the-old-forum-at-leptis-image6688189.html>

33 https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidTristiaBkTwo.php#anchor_Toc35314589

34 Ulrich Schädler, *XII Scripta, Alea, Tabula -- New Evidence for the Roman History of "Backgammon"*, P84

400 AD based on game boards found at Ostia, in the Roman catacombs and a mosaic at the Eustolius complex in Kourion, Cyprus.

Overall, we can be confident that games of dice on tables, similar in nature to backgammon, were popular in the Roman empire.

Tabula in the Eastern Roman Empire: Zeno's game

The Greek writer Agathias³⁵ (530 – c. 594 AD) wrote a famous epigram describing a game of tabula played by the Byzantine emperor Zeno (425 – 491 AD). This epigram, written around 565 AD, provides invaluable evidence as to how at least one game of *tabula* was played in the later Roman Empire, and is our only source for pre-mediaeval rules.³⁶

I include the original text as this epigram is of such importance to us in reconstructing any game of *tabula*.³⁷

482.-ΑΓΑΘΙΟΥ ΣΧΟΛΑΣΤΙΚΟΥ

Ούτιδανοί μερόπων, εἰ καὶ μεγα ρέξαμεν ἔργον,

οὔτινος εἰς μνήμην δηρον ἐπερχόμεθα: οἱ δ' ἀγαθοί, κὴν μηδέν, ἀναπνεύσωσι δε μούνον,

ὡς Λίβυς εἶπεν ἀνὴρ, τοῦτ' ἀδάμαντι μένει. δήποτε γὰρ Ζήνωνα πολισσούχον βασιλιᾶ,

παίγνιον ἀφράστων ἐκτελέοντα κύβων, τοίη ποικιλότευκτος ἔλεν θέσις, εὐτ' ἀπὸ λευκού,

του καὶ ὀπισθιδίην εἰς οδὸν ἐρχομένου, ἐπτὰ μὲν ἔκτος ἔχεν, μίαν εἴνατος» αὐτάρου σουμεμος

δισσας ἀμφιέπων ἴσος ἔην δεκάτω: ὅς τε πέλει μετὰ σούρμον ἔχεν δύο, μουνάδα δ' ἄλλην

ψήφον τὴν πυμάτην ἀμφιέπεσκε δίβος. ἀλλὰ μέλας δισσας μεν ἐν ὀγδοάτῳ λίπε χῶρω

καὶ τόσσας ἐτέρας ἐς θέσιν ἑνδεκάτην ἀμφὶ δυωδέκατον δε διέπρεπον εἰκελοι ἄλλοι,

καὶ τρισκαιδεκάτῳ ψήφος ἔκειτο μία: δίζυγες "Ἀντίγονον διεκόσμεον· ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτό

ἴσος ἔμμενε τύπος πεντεπικαιδεκάτῳ, οκτωκαιδεκάτῳ πανομοίῳ εἰσέτι δ' ἄλλας

εἶχεν διχθαδίας τετρατος ἐκ πυμάτου. αὐτὰρ ἀναξ λευκοῖο λαχῶν σημήϊα πεσσού,

35 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agathias>

36 The oldest manuscript of the poem is the Heidelberg Palatine Anthology, Cod. Pal. graec. 23, most likely created in Constantinople in the 10th century. https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/en/bpd/glanzlichter/anthologia_palatina.html

The manuscript has been digitised and the poem is on page 440, continuing on page 441:

<https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/cpgraec23/0466>

The digital images are free to use:

<https://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/Englisch/helios/digi/nutzung/Welcome.html>

37 <https://archive.org/details/greekanthology03pato/page/268/mode/2up?q=zeno>

Paton, W. R., The Greek Anthology, London, W. Heinemann; New York, G.P. Putnam's sons, 1916-18.

και την έσσομένην ου νοέων παγίδα,. τριχθαδίας αδόκητα βαλων ψηφίδας απ' ήθμού,
πύργου δουρατέου κλίμακι κευθομένη, δοιά και έξ και πέντε κατήγαγεν αυτικά δ' οκτώ
άζυγας είχαν όλες πρόσθε μεριζομένας. τάβλην φεύγετε πάντες, έπει και κοίρανος αυτος
κείνης τάς αλόγους ουχ υπάλυξε τύχας.

city, while in the middle of a game played with the capricious dice, found himself in this complicated position: when of the white men who were on their way back, the sixth line contained seven, the ninth one, and the tenth and *summus* two each, while the line after the *summus* had two, and the last piece was on the *divus*. Black had two on the eighth line, and as many on the eleventh; on the twelfth were two, and one on the thirteenth. There were two on *Antigonus* and also on the fifteenth and eighteenth, and the fourth line from the last (the twentieth) also had two. It was the king's turn to play for White, and not seeing the trap in store for him, he cast the three dice from the wooden box with its hidden ladder, and threw two, six, and five, so that at once he had eight single pieces in all which had formerly been next others (?). Avoid backgammon, as the king himself did not escape from its blind chance.

Paton's text is elegant but the enquiring game-player wants to know more exactly what Agathias said? Katie Hambrook has provided the following literal translation of the key section of the epigram:

For once an elaborately worked position grasped Zeno, king and holder of the city, as he finished the game of unguessable dice, when from the white [side], which was coming into the back route:

The 6th had seven, the 9th one, but the *summus*³⁸, frequenting two, was like the ten; the one which was after the *summus* had two, and the *divus* frequented the other last single counter. But the black [side] leaves two in the 8th place and as many companions in the 11th setting and another like number of counters were prominent around the 12th and one counter lay on the 13th. Double-yoked [counters] adorned the *Antigonus*. But the same shape [i.e. the same number of counters] remained on the 15th, wholly similar on the 18th. And again the 4th from the last had another twofold counters. But the king, having by chance the signals of the white counters, and not perceiving the trap that was to be, throwing the threefold counters from the nosebag that causes surprises, the wooden tower with its hidden ladder, he brought down a double and a six and a five; so at once he had eight unyoked whole [counters] before divided [counters].

It is clear from the text that:

- This was a two-player race game with around around 24 spaces (we have the eighteenth, then the fourth from last, making at least 22, but probably not much more).
- The players took turns to roll three dice and move their pieces according to the numbers on the dice.
- A piece could not move onto a point occupied by two or more of the opponent's pieces.
- At least seven counters could be stacked on a single point.
- Leaving isolated pieces was a bad thing.

The board and method of play closely resemble modern backgammon. What else can we infer?

Louis Becq de Fouquières reconstructed the position of the pieces in 1869, assuming 24 points on the board. His interpretation makes sense and is universally accepted; this reconstruction is shown in Figure 3. I use Murray's *a – z* notation, which is in turn very similar to that of the Royal 13 A manuscript. Zeno is playing with the gold pieces, as befits an emperor.

38 Agathias used the Latin words *summus* and *divus*, transcribed in Greek letters.

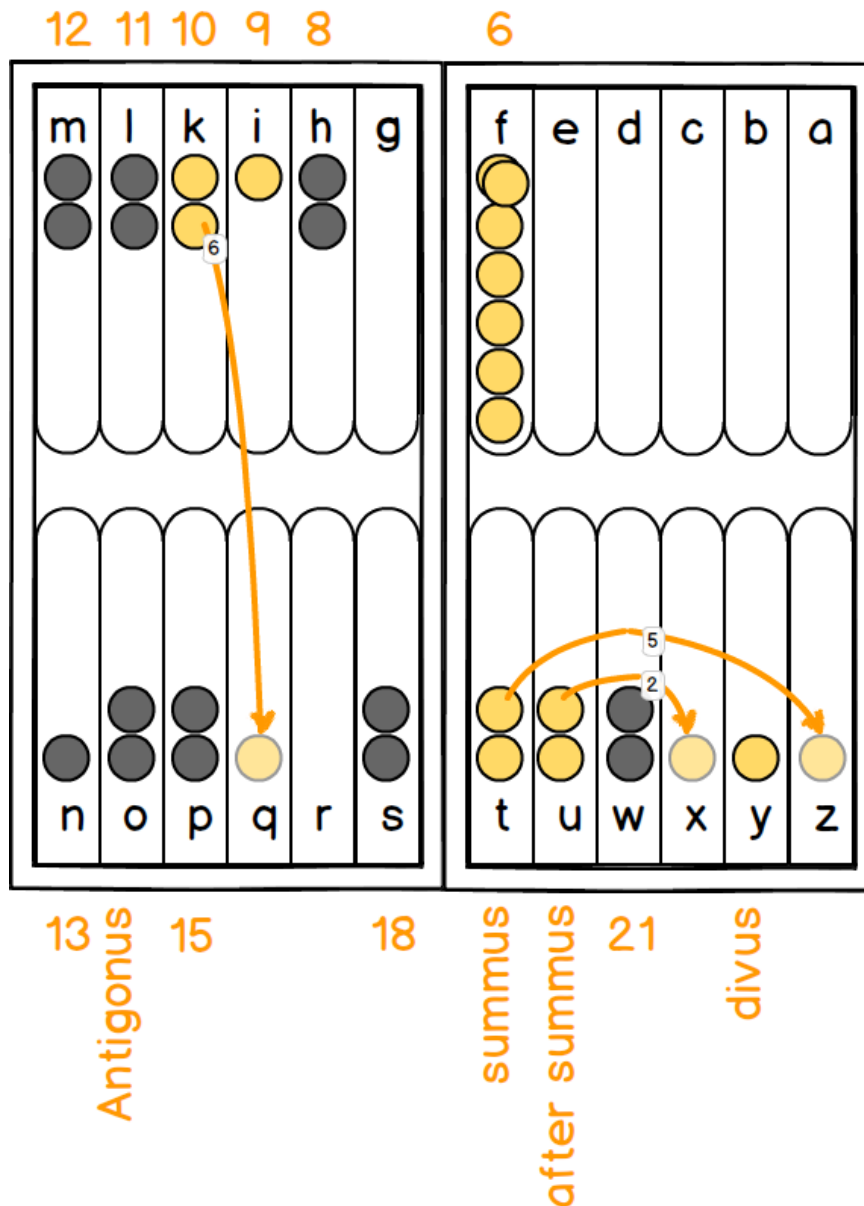


Figure 3: Zeno's game, after Becq de Fouquières

Zeno's setup

Becq de Fouquières argues that the point called *summus* or “extreme”, identified as point number nineteen, is so named because it is the furthest point a piece can reach in one turn from the first point, that is on a roll of three sixes. Becq de Fouquières knew the French game of tric-trac³⁹ in which the pieces are set up on the first point in each player's start table, so this was a natural assumption.⁴⁰ In tric-trac each player has certain named points, the *talon* (start point) and *coin de repos* (12 point), so he would see no reason that Zeno and his opponent might not each have a *summus*.

39 <https://bkgm.com/variants/Trictrac.html>

40 It is useful to know some tric-trac terminology when reading Becq de Fouquières; pieces are “dames”, and tables are called “grand jan” and “petit jan”. “Holes” are games won by scoring 12 points on the tric-trac board, after which the board may be reset.

If we accept Becq de Fouquières' explanation of *summus*, then Zeno's pieces started on point *a*, as in tric-trac.

This also offers us a suggestion for the meaning of *Antigonus*; we know from Plutarch that Antigonus I Monophthalmus (one-eye) had a connection with *tabula*, and Agathias' *Antigonus* is point 14, which is the point a piece would reach on a roll of six, six and one. I suggest that the "one" roll is a reference to Antigonus' single eye.

Ulrich Schädler⁴¹ takes the opposite view that since no reference is made to *summus* etc for Zeno's opponent, the players must have moved their pieces in the same direction, and that we have no information about setup; like all subsequent writers he seems to have overlooked Becq de Fouquières explanation for the *summus* and to be unaware of the workings of tric-trac.

The *summus* can also be considered the 'extreme' point of the bearing table. The games *Imperial* and *Provincial* (R) have no bearing off; the winner is the player who first moves all their pieces into the bearing table. If this rule is applied to Zeno's game the *summus* is both the furthest a piece can move in one turn, and also the furthest it needs to travel for victory.

My preference is to accept Becq de Fouquières' meaning for *summus*, and I will assume that:

- all Zeno's pieces started at point *a*, and
- each player had a *summus* but Agathias thought it would be confusing to switch viewpoint.

Zeno's opponent: setup and direction of play

Writers do not agree as to whether the players moved their pieces in opposite directions around the board, as in modern backgammon, or in the same direction, as in various mediaeval games. Appropriately, the evidence points in both directions.

Austin interprets Agathias thus:

White...is transferring his men through his opponents tables back to a home table, exactly as in backgammon.

I.e. the players are moving in opposite directions.

Becq de Fouquières takes the same view as Austin – that the players travel in opposite directions – and again bases his conclusion on Agathias' text coupled with his assumptions based on tric-trac.

Bell gives a detailed set of rules for Zeno's game, and credits Becq de Fouquières, but he states:

The pieces were entered on the board in the first quarter and travelled anti-clockwise round the track. Apparently both colours travelled in the same direction, and it improves the game if no piece is allowed to enter the same half of the board until all the player's pieces are entered into the first half.⁴²

Although Bell's game is very playable, it is not Becq de Fouquières interpretation, Bell does not explain his reasoning and his final rule is explicitly invented to aid gameplay (the "no bearing" rule may be substituted for this purpose). Bell may have derived his rules from mediaeval games and I think Bell's game is better matched by the reconstruction I have later called *Pyf*.

⁴¹ Ulrich Schädler, XII Scripta, Alea, Tabula -- New Evidence for the Roman History of "Backgammon"

⁴² Bell, R. C. Board and Table Games from Many Civilizations, 1969. Section on Tabula.

As previously stated, Schädler believe the players moved their pieces in the same direction so that the named points occurred once only, but he proposes no meanings for *summus* and *Antigonus*.

Smith suggested that Agathias means the pieces moved out and then home again, but I have not found any evidence of such a game in history, and I cannot see how you would remember which pieces were travelling in each direction.⁴³

Another factor to consider is the distribution of the pieces. The cluster of seven pieces on point *f*, the lack of any other pieces in *af*, and the interspersed locations of the two players' pieces all seem more likely to occur with movement in the same direction. Against this, Agathias' story may be in the nature of one of the many problems presented in later manuscripts, and represent a contrived scenario rather than natural gameplay.

We should also note that Zeno died around 40 years before Agathias' birth and we do not know whether Agathias and Zeno were familiar with the same variant of *tabula*. This raises the interesting possibility that the epigram contains clues to two different games. Perhaps Zeno and his opponent did play in the same direction, but Agathias assumed a game and terminology with which he was himself more familiar? We have precedent for writers not realising they were talking about different games.

Agathias numbers his points from 1, which may support the idea that both players moved in the same direction, or it may merely mean that he used Zeno's point of view for both sets of pieces.

Sticking with our assumption that Zeno started with all his pieces on point *a*, can we deduce how Zeno's opponent set up and moved their pieces?

I propose a symmetric setup with the second player's pieces on the first point of a different table⁴⁴ across which the pieces would then travel⁴⁵. This suggests three scenarios:

1. Pieces start on opposing points, *a* and *z*: move in opposite directions, Figure 4.
2. Pieces start at player's right, *a* and *n*: move in the same direction, Figure 5.
3. Pieces start at opposite ends of the same board, *a* and *m*: move in opposite directions, Figure 6.

43 <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0063:id=duodecim-scripta-cn>

William Smith, LLD, William Wayte, G. E. Marindin, Ed. A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities (1890)

44 I discount the idea that both players started their pieces all piled up on the same point as being hopelessly unwieldy; if you wanted the players to start in the same table, it would be more natural to start the pieces off the board.

45 An asymmetric setup with one player's pieces starting on *a* and the other's with 14 on *b*, 1 on *c* is known from Baralie, but an asymmetric setup will not give Zeno's opponent a *summus*.

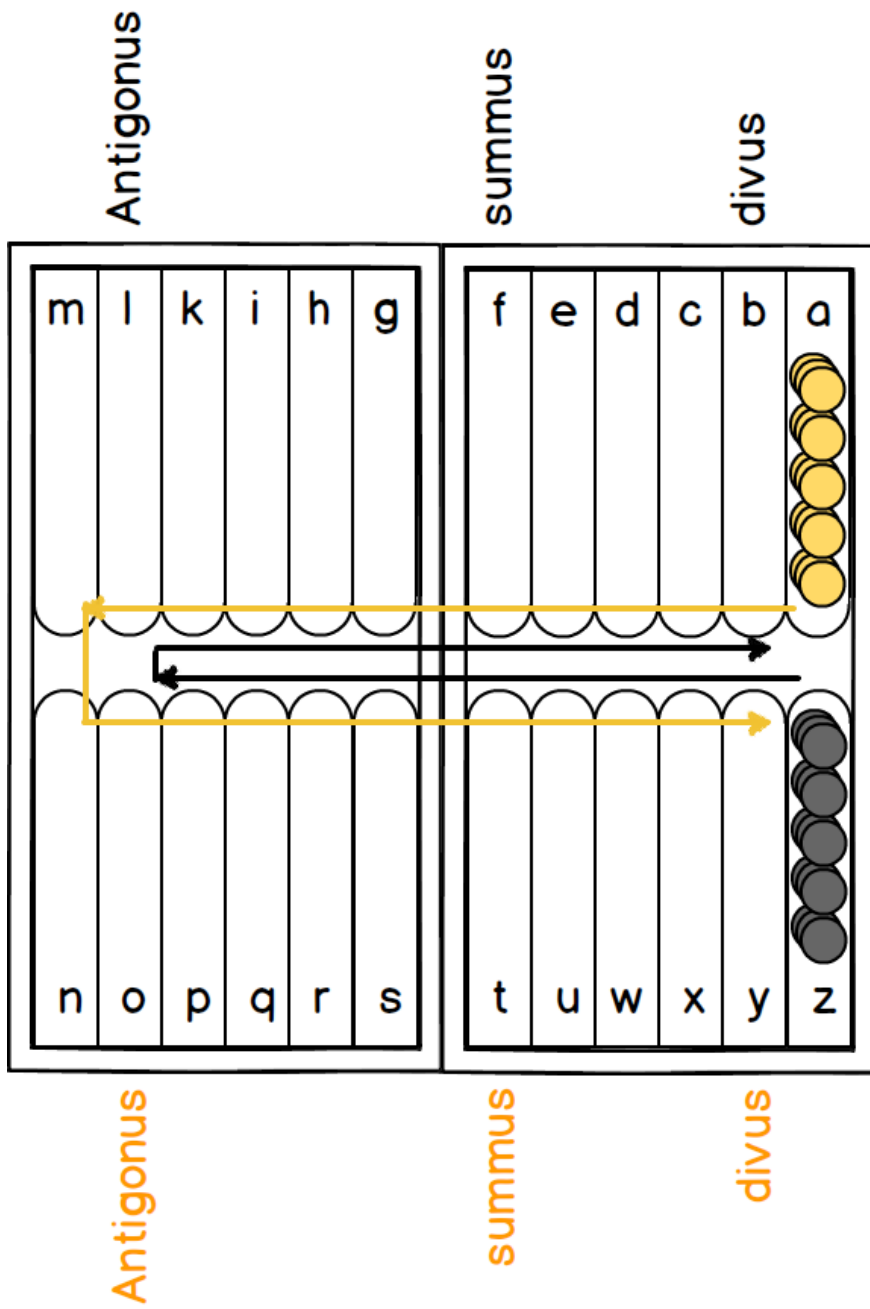


Figure 4: Setup 1

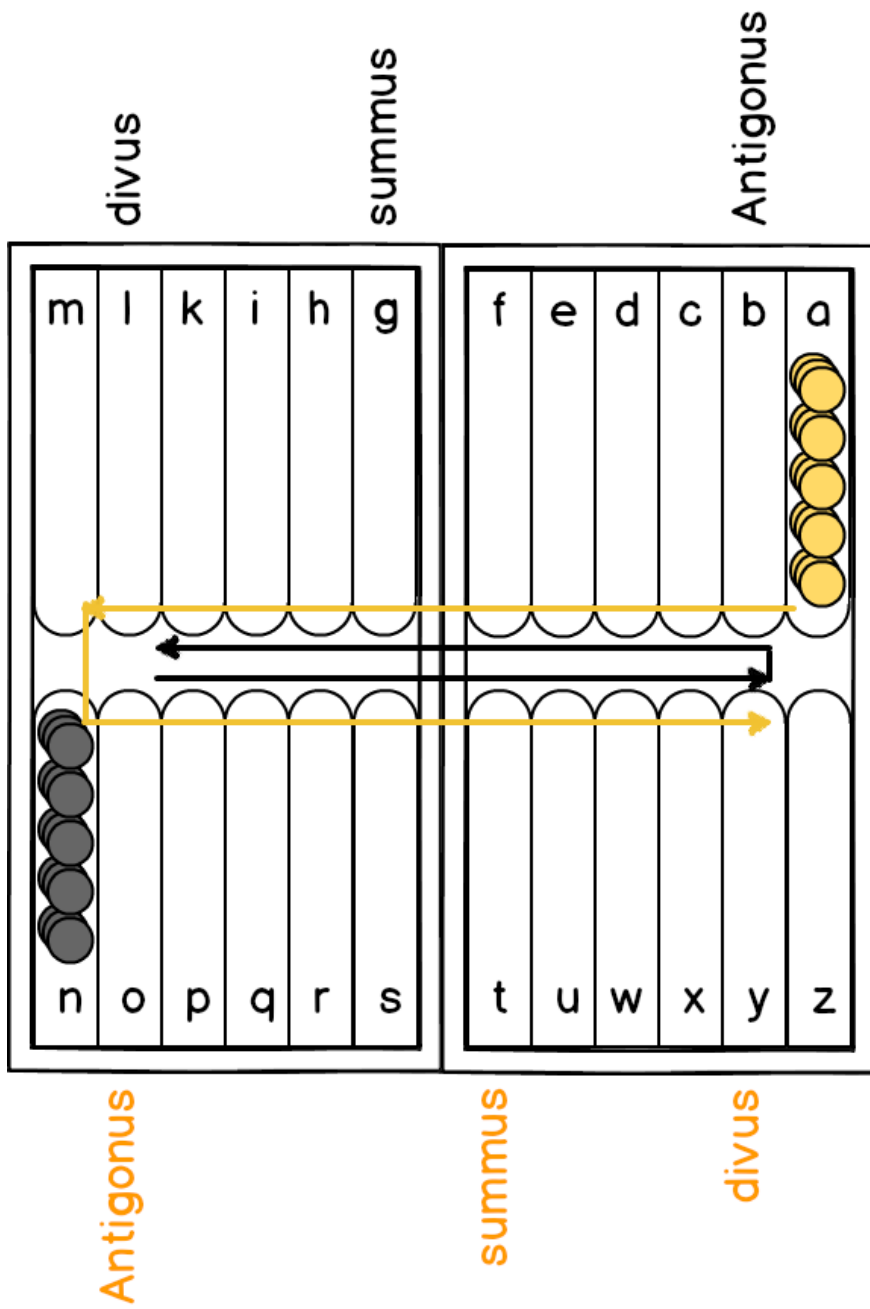


Figure 5: Setup 2

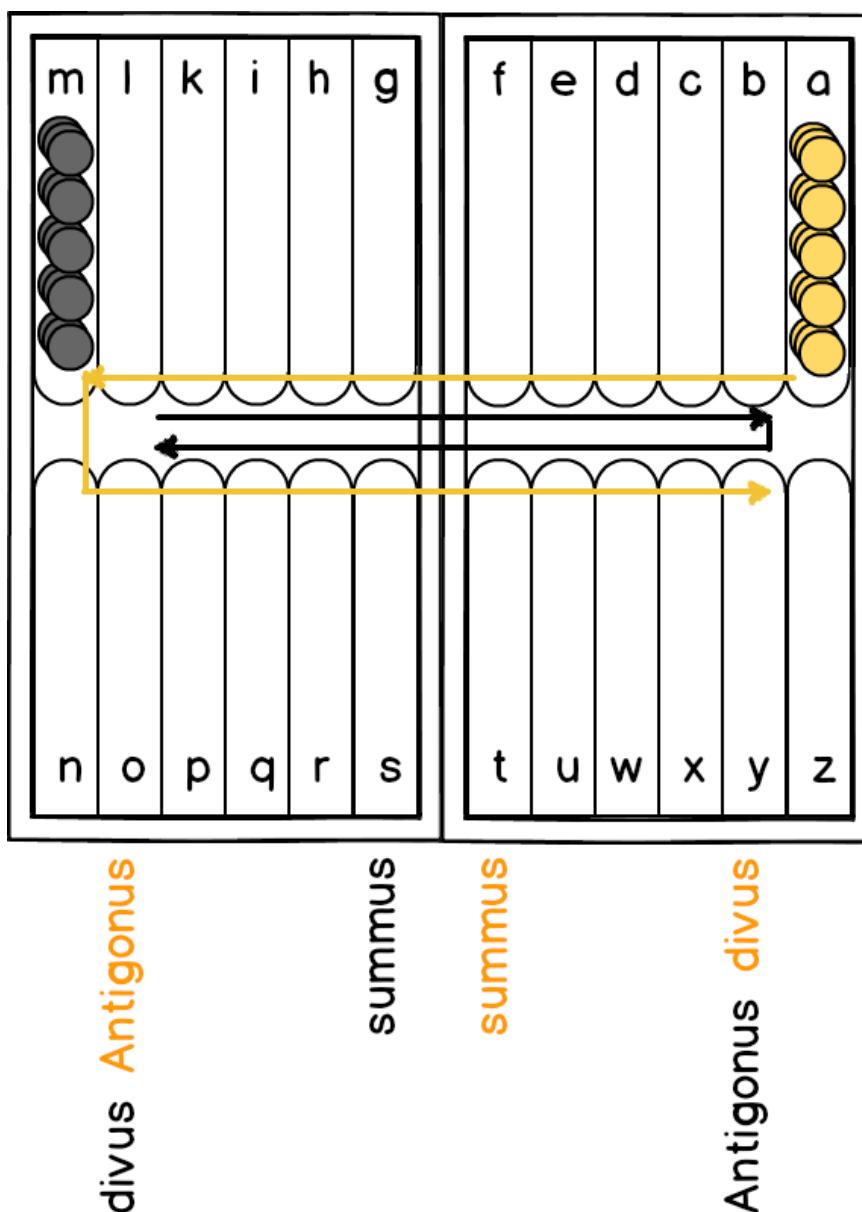


Figure 6: Setup 3

In Setup 1, each player's *Antigonus*, *summus* and *divus* is opposite the other's; they are on the same column of the board, making them easy to correlate, like the *talon* and *coin* of each player in tric-trac.

In Setup 2, the *summus* cannot be reached in a single turn because the opponent's start point blocks a move of six, six.

In Setup 3, both players' named points are on the same side and one player's *divus* is the other player's *Antigonus*. This seems an unclear and unlikely arrangement.

Setup 1 is known from tric-trac and the mediaeval games *Ludus Anglicorum* and *Emperador*. I have not found a game which uses Setup 2 or Setup 3; the closest I can find is *Reencontrat* (Alf) and *Buffa de Baldrac* (Alf) in which the pieces are brought on thus but do not start on the board.

Therefore, I consider Setup 1 with movement in opposing directions to be most likely. The arrangement of the pieces may have been contrived as a puzzle, or perhaps Agathias is using terminology applicable to his own game, without realising that Zeno was playing a different game.

I further speculate that the mediaeval game *Emperador* which we will meet later may have some connection with Zeno's game as having also been played by an emperor, and having the same setup and direction of movement.

The joy of historical re-enactment is that you may examine the evidence for yourself and form a different view which is equally valid.

Divus

What about the *divus* or "divine point" which Becq de Fouquières locates on the penultimate point of the bearing table? In our reconstruction this is the furthest point that a piece can reach while their opponent still has multiple pieces on their start point, so may perhaps be "closest to heaven"? Schädler suggests that the *di* in *divus* may refer to "two" and simply mean the second point from last⁴⁶, but it's not clear exactly what the word would then mean, and *divus* is a straightforward Latin word meaning "divine" or "godlike". Both writers agree on the location of the *divus* but the meaning remains uncertain.

Objective / bearing off

Three of Zeno's pieces could have been borne off by his rolls, and since this did not happen⁴⁷ I infer that either:

1. the winner is the first player to bear off their pieces, noting that pieces may only be borne off when all the player's pieces are in the final table; this restriction is explicit in *Ludus Anglicorum*.
2. the winner is the first player to move all their pieces into the final table as in the games *Imperial* and *Provincial* (R).

Playing with three dice and moving pieces in opposite directions, it is relatively easy to avoid leaving single pieces and a game can be concluded without any hits. Option 2 may improve matters by speeding up the end game, as well as giving the *summus* additional significance.

Mediaeval games

Once I started to look at the mediaeval manuscripts which each describe many different *tabula* games, I realised that to try to reconstruct *the* Anglo-Saxon game of tabula would be like trying to define *the* game of cards. The nuns of Rumwoldstow would have known a number of different games, varying in complexity and probably in direction of play.

Sources

Two mediaeval texts provide detailed descriptions of *tabula* games:

- The Libro de los Juegos ("Book of games"), commissioned by Alfonso X of Castile, Galicia and León, 1283 (Alf)
- Royal 13 A XVIII, part 2, first half of fourteenth century (R)

⁴⁶ Ulrich Schädler, XII Scripta, Alea, Tabula -- New Evidence for the Roman History of "Backgammon", p85

⁴⁷ As Zeno moves two pieces in the bearing table, movement within it must be permitted, but may be of no benefit.

Royal 13 A is composite manuscript in Latin and Anglo-Norman French. The section of interest to us contains a drawing of a *tabula* board and a Latin text headed *Ludi ad tabulas* [games of tables]. In 2013, Ulrich Schädler published a new transcription of the text based on images provided by the British Library and a detailed analysis in German of the games of *tabula* which it describes.⁴⁸ With the aid of a popular online translation service, one can use Schädler to improve upon Willard Fiske's 1905 transcription and translation.⁴⁹

The variants *Emperador* (Libro de los Juegos) and *Ludus Anglicorum* (Royal 13) are very similar and have elements in common with our reconstruction of Zeno's game, which I read as supporting evidence for that reconstruction, and suggesting that this was a common variant of long standing.

Summary of variants

I have tabulated key elements of the games described in Libro de los Juegos (Alf) and Royal 13 A (R) as they are interesting in themselves.

Several games use two dice plus an automatic roll of 6, which I have given as 2 +6.

Other ways to handle playing with two dice are maioret, when the higher number is duplicated, and minorett, when the lower number is duplicated. Both of these create automatic doubles and make it easier to move pieces in pairs.

The "Ad fallum" rule is known in the Royal 13 A problems, in which if a player cannot use a die roll, they automatically lose the game.

Abbreviations

Alf: Libro de los juegos, commissioned by Alfonso X

R: ms Royal 13 A, held in the British Museum

⁴⁸ Das Spiel der Engländer: Backgammonspiele im Ms. Royal 13 A xviii der British Library
In Matthias Teichert (ed.), Sport Und Spiel Bei den Germanen: Nordeuropa von der Römischen Kaiserzeit Bis Zum
Mittelalter. De Gruyter. pp. 109-162 (2013).

⁴⁹ BL Royal 13 A XVIII, ff 158r-160r. Transcribed in Fiske, Willard, and Horatio S. White. 1905. Chess in Iceland and
in Icelandic literature, with historical notes on other table-games. Florence: Florentine Typographical Society.

Libro de los Juegos

There is a common rule that the players “roll battle” to determine who starts. This may mean each player rolling all the dice to see who gets the higher score.

Name	Pieces per player	Boards	Setup	Dice	Movement	Reverse
buffa cortesa ⁵⁰	15	all	None	2 or 3	Both players enter in af, move amnz, bear tz	No
buffa de baldrac	15	all	None	3	Movement is only allowed after all pieces have been placed P1 enters in af, moves amnz, bears tz P2 enters in mg, moves mazn, bears in sn	Yes
cab e quinal v1	15	all	P1: 15 on e P2: 15 on f	3	Both players move amnz, bear tz	No
cab e quinal v2	15	all	P1: 14 on e, 1 on d P2: 14 on f, 1 on t	2 +6	Both players move amnz, bear tz	No
doblet	12	af, tz	P1: 2 on each point from a to f P2: 2 on each point from t to z	3	Each player moves within their own table only	n/a
doze canes or doze hermanos	12	af	None: the goal is simply to place your pieces	2	None: but blots can be taken and must re-enter from the same direction	No
emperador <i>aka Ludus Anglicorum (R)</i>	15	all	P1: 15 on a P2: 15 on z	3	P1 enters in af, moves amnz, bears tz P2 enters in tz, moves znma, bears af	Yes
fallas <i>aka Fayles, (R)</i>	15	all	P1: 2 on a, 13 on t P2: 2 on z, 13 on f	3	P1 enters in af, moves amnz, bears tz P2 enters in tz, moves znma, bears af	Yes

⁵⁰ Buffa courtesa is described as being the same as Pareia de entrada except that any throw which a player cannot use can be played by the opponent.

laquet ⁵¹	15	all	P1: 1 on a, 14 on z P2: 1 on ?, 3 on u, 3 on v, 3 on w, 3 on x, 2 on y	2	Both players move amnz, bear tz	No
medio emperador	15	af, tz	P1: 15 on a P2: 15 on z	2 or 3	P1 enters in af, moves az, bears tz P2 enters in tz, moves za, bears af	Yes
pareia de entrada	15	all	None	2 or 3	Both players enter in af, move amnz, bear tz	No
quinze tablas	15 or fewer, down to 6	all	P1: 2 on each point from a to g and 1 on h P2: 2 on each point from z to s and 1 on r	3	P1 enters in af, moves amnz, bears tz P2 enters in tz, moves znma, bears af	Yes
reencontrat ⁵²	15?	all	None	3	P1: enters in af, moves amnz, bears tz P2: enters in ns, moves nzam, bears gm	No
seis, doz & as	15	all	P1: 3 on a, 4 on b, 8 on f P2: 5 each on c, d and e	3	Both players move amnz, bear tz. Captured men are re-entered in the table diagonally opposite to that in which they were taken	No
todas tablas ⁵³	15	all	P1: 2 on a, 5 on f, 3 on h 5 on m P2: 2 on z, 5 on t, 3 on r, 5 on n	2	P1 enters in af, moves az, bears tz P2 enters in tz, moves za, bears af	Yes

51 In laquet, the author seems again to have mixed up the direction of tables, first saying to put 14 pieces on the one-point, and then referring to those pieces as being on the six-point. The location of the second player's single piece could be g, m, n or s, because the "third table" may be gm or ns, and the "one-point" may be at either end of that table! The illustration is missing from the translation.

52 Los Romanos reencontrat shares with Emperador and Ludus Anglicorum, the rule that only points on the far side of the board from a piece's start table can be secured.

53 The text of Libro de los Juegos is inconsistent with the illustration of the setup of Todas Tablas. Murray went with the text; I have followed the illustration, which shows each players' pieces arranged along one side of the board, unlike modern backgammon. I suggest that the writer got their point numbers mixed up but that the illustrator knew what the setup looked like.

Royal 13 A

Name	Pieces per player	Boards	Setup	Dice	Movement	Reverse
Baralie	15	all	P1: 15 on a ⁵⁴ P2: 14 on b, 1 on c	2 +6	P1 enters in af, moves amnz, bears tz P2 enters in af, moves amnz, bears tz	No
Faylis <i>aka Fallis (Alf)</i>	15	all	P1: 2 on a, 13 on t P2: 2 on z, 13 on f	3	P1 enters in af, moves amnz, bears tz P2 enters in tz, moves znma, bears af	Yes
Imperial	15	all	P1: 5 on f, 5 on g, 5 on k P2: 5 on p, 5 on s, 5 on t	3	P1 enters in af, moves amnz P2 enters in tz, moves znma The game ends when the pieces are in the last house; there is no bearing off	Yes
Ludus Anglicorum <i>aka Emperador (Alf)</i>	15	all	P1: 15 on a P2: 15 on z	3, or 2 +6	P1 enters in af, moves amnz, bears tz P2 enters in tz, moves znma, bears af	Yes
Ludus ⁵⁵ Lumbardorum	15	af, tz	P1: 15 on a P2: 15 on z	2	P1 enters in fa, moves fz, bears zt P2 enters in tz, moves ta, bears af	Yes
Paume Carie v1 ⁵⁶ <i>cf doze canes (Alf)</i>	15	af	None	2	P1 enters in af, no movement, bears af P2 enters in af, no movement, bears af	No
Paume Carie v2	15	all	None	2	Both players enter in af, move amnz, bear tz A piece in the bearing table cannot be moved except by bearing	No
Provincial	15	all	P1: divided between f and g P2: divided between s and t	3	P1 enters in af, moves amnz P2 enters in tz, moves znma The game ends when the pieces are in the last house; there is no bearing off	Yes

⁵⁴ P1 won the previous game or has the first throw. The setup is reversed, running zt, if P2 won the previous game or has the first throw.

⁵⁵ Ulrich Schädler comments that stones may not be re-entered on one's own start point, and Murray implies that the same restriction applies as with Ludus Anglicorum, that you may only secure points on your bearing-off board.

⁵⁶ I think Murray made an error saying "there is movement, but meant "there is no movement".

Ludus Anglicorum and Emperador

Considering these two manuscripts, I propose *Ludus Anglicorum* (R) as a game to be played at Rumwoldstow. It is worth discussing *Emperador* (Alf) at the same time, as the two games are virtually identical and seem to be important, each being the first game described in their manuscript. They appear to be the “serious gamer’s game”. The basic game is the same as our proposed rules for Zeno’s game:

- Players pieces start on opposing points, *a* and *z*.
- Pieces move in opposite directions around the board, bearing off in *af* and *sz*.
- Isolated pieces may be hit and must be brought in on the player’s start table.

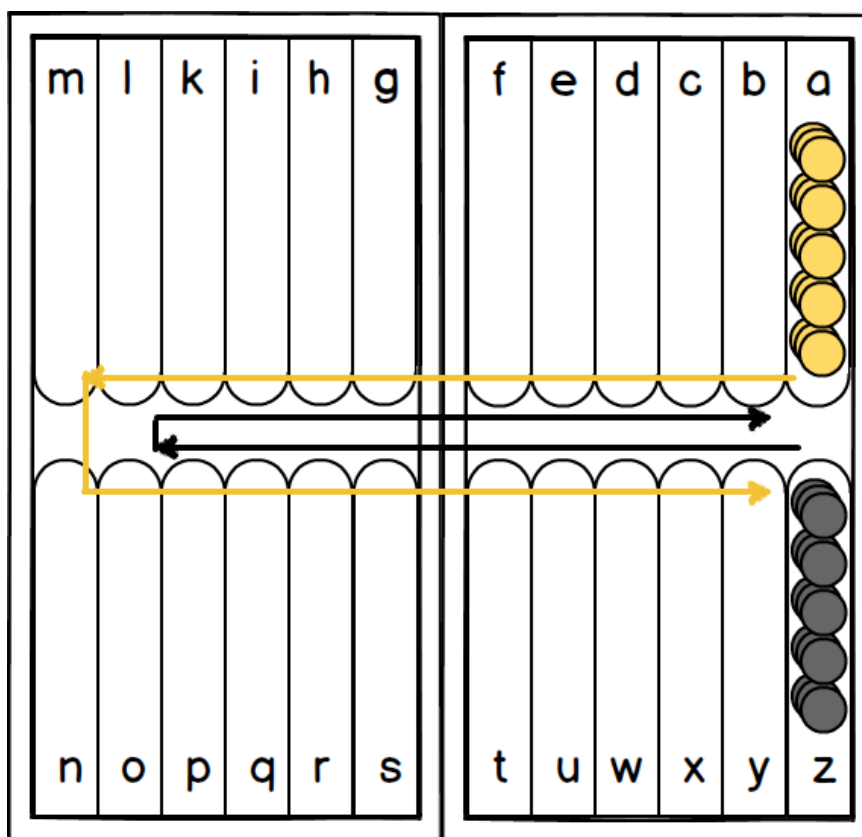


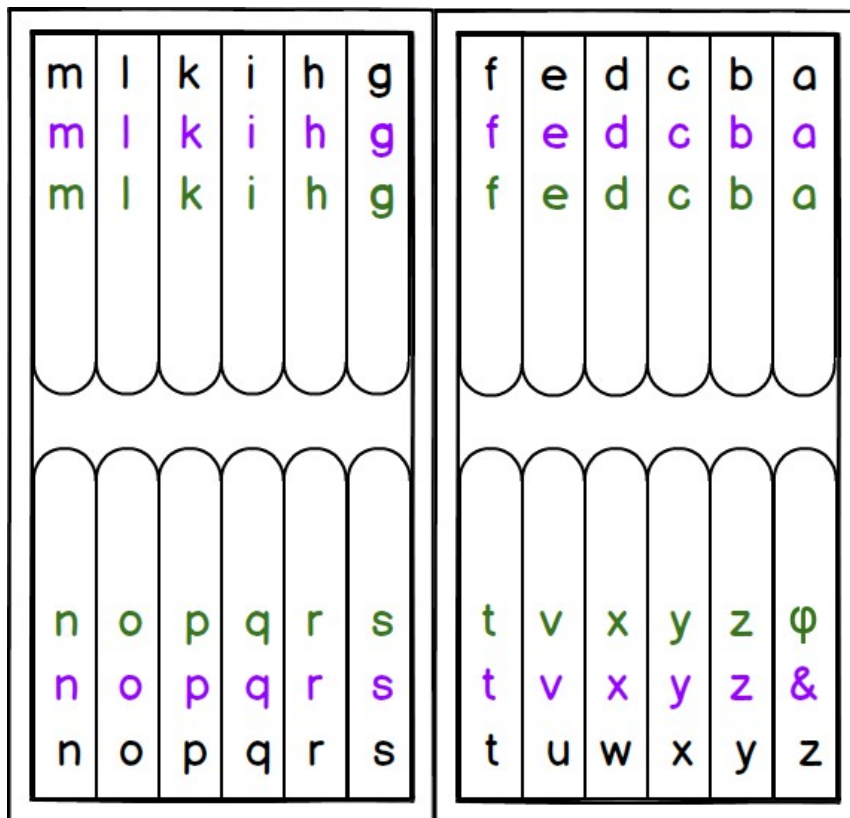
Figure 7: Setup for *Emperador* and *Ludus Anglicorum*

Royal 13 A provides a very detailed and technical description of the game. *Libro de los Juegos* is less clear, but there seems little doubt that the intention is the same.

There is a special rule on movement – a player may not secure any point on side of the table where they enter pieces:

- The player who enters *af* may not place a second piece on any point *am* but may secure points on the other side of the board, *nz*.
- The player who enters *tz* may not place a second piece on any point *nz*, but may secure points on the other side of the board, *am*.

The author of ms Royal 13 A included a diagram which labels the points on the board. Unfortunately the final point is labelled with an unclear character that Fiske and Schädler interpreted as & or φ . Murray used almost the same notation but ended *tuwxyz*, avoiding the need for a special character. I use Murray's notation but have retained Fiske and Schädler's notation when quoting them directly; see Figure 8.



a - z: Murray

a - &: ms Royal 13 A, after Fiske

a - φ : ms Royal 13 A, after Schädler

Figure 8: Comparison of notations

Royal 13 A (Schädler's transcription) allows us to clarify how this rule applies to the start point, *a* or *z*:

Et sciendum quod ille qui sedet ex parte .am. potest nodare quemlibet punctum in pagina .mg. et in pagina .fa. excepto puncto .a. quum occupatur per duos homines adversarii sui vel plures, et quum non est ibi nisi unus homo tunc potest capere eum.

Et quemcumque potest incipere aliquem hominem adversarii non nodatum in puncto, ubi terminatur numerus omnium vel singulorum taxillorum suorum, potest capere eum, et tunc ille homo captus redibit ad paginam *tφ*., et intrabit cum *.vi.* in *.t.*, Et cum *.5.* in *.v.* Et cum *.4.* in *.x.*, et cum *.3.* in *.y.* Et cum *.2.* in *.z.* Et cum *.1.* in *.φ.*, et hoc si illa puncta non fuerint occupata per aliquem de suis propriis nec nodata per adversarium.

In English this may be rendered as:

And you have to know that the player on side *am* can block any house in the fields *mg* and *fa*, except house *a*, which is occupied by two or more opposing stones; but if there is only one stone there, he can hit it.

And whoever hits any of the opponent's checkers that have not been doubled in a house where the total number of points of all or one of his dice ends, can capture it, and then the captured checker must go back to square *tφ*⁵⁷ and re-enter with a 6 on *t*, with a 5 on *v*, with a 4 on *x*, with a 3 on *y*, with a 2 on *z* and with a 1 on *φ*⁵⁸, but only if those houses are not occupied by one of his own stones or blocked by stones of the opponent.⁵⁹

This tells us that a player may only bring a piece onto the start point if the start point does not already have one of their own stones on it, and is not secured by the opponent. From this we infer that:

- A player may hit a single piece on their opponent's start point.
- A player may secure their opponent's start point.
- Although the start point begins with more than one piece on it, the player may not re-enter pieces onto their start point unless it is empty or contains a single opposing piece.

The rules specify that all pieces must be in *tz* before they can be borne off, a restriction known in backgammon and inferred in Zeno's game. This implies that it must be possible to stack more than two pieces on a point in the bearing table.

Dice

Emperador is played with three dice, as shown in the manuscript illustration. Ludus Anglicorum is played thus:

Et tunc ludent cum tribus taxillis vel cum duobus, supponito semper pro tertio taxillo *vi.*

And then they will play with three dice or with two, always presuming for the third dice by six.

This phrase is ambiguous; does the presumed six apply when rolling three dice? The author gives us tactical advice which I think means that the presumed six always applies:

Propter quod multum expedit in hoc ludo nodare punctum *g* et *f* propter iactum taxilli tertii, in quo supponitur semper *vi*, quia punctus *g* nodatus impedit egressum adversarii sui ibidem cum *vi*. Et punctus *f* nodatus impedit ingressum adversarii sui ibidem cum *vi*.

57 Royal 13 A is confusing but by comparison with Libro de los Juegos, I conclude that the author intends that hit pieces re-enter on the table where that player's pieces started.

58 Royal 13 A labels the furthest points as *t*, *v*, *x*, *y*, *z*, *φ*.

59 Ulrich Schädler's German translation, then run through a popular online translation service into English.

For which reason it is much better in this game to knot point g and f on account of the throw of the third dice, **in which it is always supposed to be 6**, because point g will prevent the knotted point from going out of its opponent with 6.

The author reiterates when describing the special manoeuvre *lympolding*:

...et tunc semper capias adversarium tuum in puncto t et ipse te recapiet per VI, qui est semper iactus supponitus...

...and then always catch your opponent at point t and he'll take you back by **6, which is always assumed to be thrown...**

I think the three dice would have to be rolled at once, and the player chooses which is the “third dice”. If the dice were rolled in sequence, the third throw would be redundant, being always six.

I suggest that when you roll three dice, you must nominate one of them to be your presumed six:

- I roll one, two, four: I choose to turn the one to a six, giving six, two, four.
- I roll two, three, six; I choose the six as my third dice, leaving my throw at two, three, six.
- I roll one, six, six; I choose the one as my third dice, giving six, six, six.

If your roll includes a natural six, is that automatically your “third dice”, or may you nominate a different dice to be the “third dice” and convert that to a six also? On principle of parsimony, I favour the minimal actions version, in which if your roll contains any sixes then you play it as is. Only if there is no six in your roll must you choose one dice to change to a six. As a player, there are already enough decisions to make without further considering how to modify a roll containing a six.

Special configurations

The restriction on movement enables each game to have particular configurations of the board, described as *barata* (Alf), *Lympolding* (R) and *Lurching* (R) which may be interpreted as special victory conditions, or as advantageous configurations similar to a prime in modern backgammon.

Emperador: ties and barata (Alf)

In the introduction to games of tables, Libro de los Juegos presents *barata* as a general victory condition, along with a tie condition:

The prime⁶⁰ [barata] of tables is when one player captures so many of the other's pieces that he then does not have points upon which to enter them and he therefore loses the game. And tying is that even if he has very few pieces and he enters them that neither one can play even if he wishes. Whence also for the prime because without these three pieces which are in addition to the first twelve, it could not be done.

This description seems specific to *Emperador* because in other games, there is no restriction on how many pieces one may enter on a point. It seems to me that in games where points on the start table can be secured, *barata* could only be achieved by securing the six points in the opponent's entry table. I am also not sure why three extra pieces would be required, more than the twelve to secure

⁶⁰ “Barata” in modern Spanish means “sale” or “cheap”. Sonja Musser Golladay translates it as “prime”, borrowing the modern backgammon term.

the points; possibly these would have been used to hit the opponent's pieces elsewhere on the board?

The game of *Emperador* specifically is a tie if both players have pieces that must be re-entered and there is no possible roll that would allow the piece to be re-entered, because all points in the entry table are already occupied, either by one of their own pieces, or by one or more of their opponent's pieces.

I think that a tie is only possible if a player may move another piece, to hit one of their opponent's pieces, instead of re-entering a hit piece. Otherwise, as soon as a player has a piece they cannot re-enter on any roll, they will be unable to move. *Libro de los Juegos* does not specify that hit pieces must be re-entered before another move can be made, so this seems possible in *Emperador*, but would not occur in *Ludus Anglicorum*.

Barata for *Emperador* is defined as:

Quál es la barata d'este juego. La barata es quando el un jogador tiene mejoría del otro e tiene doze tablas entabladas por que ell otro, maguer entre, non pueda salir, e de las otras tablas que tiene hase de baxar o fazer y alguna a que dé.

E quandol da quatro tablas o más, <es> el juego baratado, por que puede levar sus tablas en salvo o darle más si quisiere, e gana el juego por este logar. E éste es el departimiento d'este juego.

In Golladay's translation:

What is the prime of this game. A prime in when one player has an advantage over the other and has twelve pieces set up so that the other even if can enter he cannot escape and of the other pieces that he has he must bring them down or make one [able] to be hit there.

And when he hits four or more pieces the game is "primed" because he can bare (sic) his pieces off safely or hit him more if he wishes. And he wins the game in this case.

This seems slightly different from the general description we saw earlier, in that the loser may be able to enter pieces but cannot get them past the blockade. Murray interprets *barata* as meaning that a player has secured six consecutive points. I assume "bring them down" is a reference to moving pieces off the stack on the player's start point.

I am not sure whether this *barata* is a victory in itself or whether victory is assumed only when four or more pieces are hit.

Ludus Anglicorum: Lympholding and Lurching

I'd want to play *Ludus Anglicorum* just so we can use the word *lympolding*. I have found no etymology of "lympold", though Schädler suggests it may mean something like "waiting" based on its sole other known occurrence in the Picardy manuscript H 279, fol. 94v Issue No. X, Montpellier Medical School where "limpole" is used to describe a style of game in which an opponent is forced to skip turns. It is possible that the word has a common origin with Middle English "lymbo" [edge], with its suggestion of waiting "in limbo", but I cannot find any evidence for this.

“Lurch” seems to derive from dialectical German “lurtsch” and French “lourche”, which was a backgammon-style game in Middle French. In this game, lourche was also used as an adjective: rendre quelqu’un lourche (literally to make someone ‘lourche’) meant to cost someone the win.⁶¹

It is unclear whether *lympolding* and *lurching* are victories in themselves, as Murray assumes, or whether they are tactical positions similar to a prime in modern backgammon, where six consecutive points are defended and an opposing piece cannot pass until the prime is broken. The Latin word “victoria” may mean actually winning the game, or it may mean something more like triumph or advantage.

The manuscript Royal 13 A tells us about *lympolding* and *lurching* in *Ludus Anglicorum*:

Est et alia magna et sollempnis et magni magisterii, ut si ille qui sedit ex parte n& posset nodare puncta n o p q r ita quod punctum s esset apertum, et quod possit compellere adversarium suum ducere viii homines usque in punctum a, et tunc facere quod habeat unum hominem in t et alium in u, et alium in x, et alium in y, et alium in z, et alium in & et septimum adhuc irreductum; et baec victoria vocatur lymboldyng. Si autem pagina tota t& fuerit occupata per adversarium et [2 Wörter unleserlich: ... fuerit?] unum ad intrandum [2–3 Wörter unleserlich] homines [1 Wort unleserlich] non vocabitur illa victoria lymboldyng sed vocatur lurchyng. cautela autem in hoc ludo est, ut ille qui sedet ex parte nf habeat ista puncta nodata n o p q r et quod punctus s sit apertus, ita quod adversarius suus posset exire cum hominibus suis usque ad paginam mg Et cum ibidem duxerit unum vel duas de suis, quod statim, quia citius fieri potest, nodetur punctus s ita quod non possit amplius exire usque omnes homines quos duxerit in pagina mg ponantur in puncto a et quod puncta t v x y z occupentur per adversarium. et tunc aperetur punctus s, ut iterum possit exire cum suis hominibus in pagina mg et sic fiat usque viii homines adversarii reducuntur in puncto [a] et tunc clauso puncto s fac adversarium implere cum suis hominibus puncta t v x y z et tunc remanebunt duo homines adversarii in & et tunc aperiatur punctus s, et tunc semper capias adversarium tuum in puncto t et ipse te recapiet per vi, qui est semper iactus supponitus, ita quod redibis ad paginam fa et ibi intrabis et redibis ad paginam ns usque ille habeat unum iactum, per quem oportebit ipsum evacuare punctum & de altero hominum ibidem repletorum, ita quod tantum sit in & unus homo, et relinquuntur puncta t v x y z occupata per eum, et tunc capies septimum suum hominem vagantem et tunc erit lymboldatus.⁶²

He who sits on .n&. side has a great knowledge of the game if he manages to secure .n. .o. .p. .q. .r. points, the .s. point being « opened », and if he forces his opponent to bring up eight pawns to .a., and to have one pawn on .t., another on .u., another on .x., another on .y., another on .z., another on .&. and also a seventh pawn not reentered yet ; and this victory is called « lymboldyng ».

Moreover if his opponent fills the whole .t&. table and also the .s. point, this victory is not called lymbolding but lurching. He who sits on .n&. side must be careful to secure .n. .o. .p. .q. .r. points, the .s. point being opened, to allow the opponent to go into .mg. By moving one or even two of his own, he secures the .s. point and his opponent cannot cross all his pawns, which must be brought into .mg. and placed in .a. Then the .t. .v. .x. .y. .z. points are occupied by his opponent. The .s. point being opened, as his opponent can go into .mg., his opponent brings up to eight pawns in .a. Closing the .s. point forces his opponent to fill with his men the points .t. .u. .x. .y. .z., and two

61 <https://wordhistories.net/2017/10/03/in-the-lurch-origin/>

62 Ulrich Schädler’s transcription from Das Spiel der Engländer: Backgammonspiele im Ms. Royal 13 A xviii der British Library

opposing pawns stay in .&. By releasing the .s. point, you hit the opposing pawn in .t. and he hits you again with a 6, which always is the third assumed die. You come back to .fa., .ns., until his opponent is forced to evacuate his second pawn from the .&. point, thus there is only one pawn in .&. and the remaining points .t. .u. .x. .y. .z. are occupied by one pawn, and then you hit his seventh isolated pawn and the opponent is « limpolded ».⁶³

The author seems to define *lympolding*, then mentions *lurching* as an aside, before describing the steps required to achieve *lympolding*. It seems important that the losing player is forced to move their pieces off their start position and the victory can only be achieved once they have a single piece on each point *t-z*, but it's possible the author has conflated several different scenarios.

The “victory called *lympoldyng*” is shown in Figure 9.

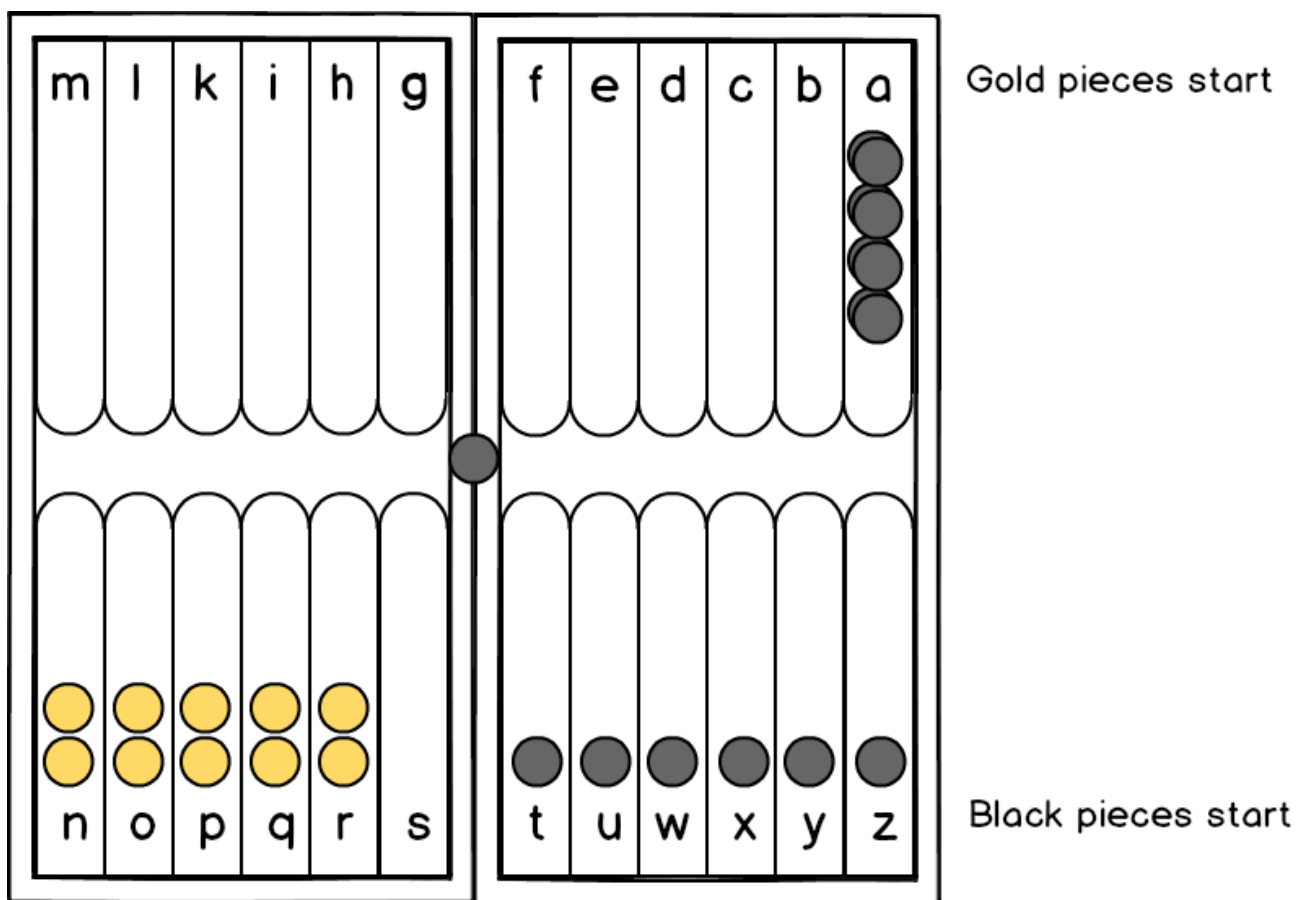


Figure 9: *Lympolding*; the black player cannot re-enter their piece. Note that gold must have five more pieces somewhere on the board.

It's not clear to me why eight pieces must be on point *a* instead of being anywhere in *af*; the player cannot move any other piece until they have re-entered the hit piece. And any of the pieces in *tz* could legitimately be moved, were it not for the piece to be re-entered. Perhaps it's assumed the player will only get into this situation if they have run out of other possible moves?

Fiske gives the description of *lurching* as:

63 Fiske's translation

Si autem tota pagina .[t]&. fuit occupata per adversarium [nec reliquitur?] unum ad intrandum [probably the author means if the "punctum .s." be not open; compare what follows] ubi agat [?] homines suos, non vocabitur illa victoria limpolding sed vocatur lurching.

Moreover if his opponent fills the whole .tφ. page and also the .s. point, this victory is not called limpolding but lurching.

Schädler comments:

Unfortunately, the manuscript is difficult to read at the relevant point, but the lurching seems to have been about using ribbons to enclose all of the opponent's stones in the starting field (here tφ) ("si autem pagina tota .tφ. Fuerit occupata per adversarium"), except for one who could be beaten again and again ("unum ad intrandum").

Murray describes *lurching* thus:

as in limpolding, but the loser has fewer than 8 men on the ace-point of his bearing table.

I'm not sure why Murray reached this conclusion.

A possible reading of the text is:

Si autem tota pagina .[t]&. fuit occupata per adversarium nec reliquitur unum ad intrandum ubi agat homines suos, non vocabitur illa victoria limpolding sed vocatur lurching.

But if the whole page .[t]&. it has been occupied by the enemy, and there is no one left to enter where he acts as his men. That victory will not be called limpolding, but it is called lurching.

I think *lympolding* and *lurching* are probably advantageous situations rather than instant victories. *Lympolding* seems to happen when there is a piece to be re-entered and no throw will allow it, and *lurching* to be when a player has no legal move because the winning player has secured six points so as to blockade the start table, which has no empty points, and the losing player's remaining pieces have reached the furthest point on the board.

However, a little play-testing suggests that if a player is *lympolded* or *lurched*, they are very unlikely to recover, and it may be better to consider the game lost at that point.

Both these situations are only possible because of the restriction on securing points on the side of the board where your own pieces start.

Verquere and Swedish Tables

Although Ludus Anglicorum has been forgotten in England, a very similar game called Verquere⁶⁴ was popular in the Netherlands, Germany, and the Nordic countries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, being indeed the dominant tables game in Sweden and Iceland. Verquere shares the key feature of Ludus Anglicorum and Emperador - that a player may only defend points

64 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verquere>

on the far side of the table from where their pieces start - and that a player's pieces all start on a single point which cannot be redefended if reduced to a blot. This is such a striking similarity that I think Verquere must have developed from Ludus Anglicorum / Emperador which were described in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries respectively, and given that Verquere was probably invented in the Netherlands in the fourteenth century.

Verquere differs from Emperador in that the pieces start at opposing corners of the board - *a* and *n* - and travel in the same direction, counter-clockwise; as in backgammon there are only two dice. It seems a natural development combining the key features of Emperador with a same-direction race as seen in other variants.

Verquere survives as "Swedish Tables"⁶⁵ which adds rules including a way to break a barrier of six or more defended points, and special victory conditions based on arranging your pieces nicely.

The naughty games

The mediaeval games sometimes show a lighter side.

Paume Carie v1 (Alf) is a team game in which the game continues after one side has won by bearing off all their pieces; the winners move the losers' pieces and may slap their opponents' hands once for each piece so moved.

Thomasin von Zirclaere's epic poem "Der Wälsche Gast"⁶⁶ (The Italian Guest) of 1215 lectures young nobles on courtesy, courtly love and chivalry. Figure 3 shows a warning against the gambling addiction.⁶⁷ We can assume that the naked player has gambled and lost his shirt.

65 <https://www.vasamuseet.se/en/about-the-vasa-museum/friends-of-vasa/the-game-of-swedish-tables>

66 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomasin_von_Zirclaere

67 <https://wgd.materiale-textkulturen.de/illustrationen/motiv.php?m=16>



Figure 10: The gambling addiction, from *Der Wälsche Gast*

I also assure you that the good sisters of Rumwoldstow would not indulge in any of these naughty games!

Games of tabula played at Rumwoldstow

Based on the Roman, post-Roman and mediaeval sources, I offer possible rules for four games of *tabula* that may have been played at Rumwoldstow.

If we conclude that Agathias and Zeno may have known different games, then the game I call Zeno is perhaps actually Agathias's game, and the game I call Pyf may be closer to Zeno's game. Both games fit the scenario described by Agathias, and both make sense as popular games very similar to those in Royal 13 A and Libro de los Juegos.

- **Zeno:** this is the earliest game for which we have any knowledge of the rules, and it is one which the author clearly considered to be well known. This reconstruction is a possible direct ancestor of *Ludus Anglicorum*. I think it is the best fit for Agathias' description and terminology.
- **Ludus Anglicorum:** this seems to be a strategic game for serious game-players and to have been a clearly defined and widely known game in the middle ages. The rules are known from *Ludus Anglicorum* (R) and *Emperador* (Alf).⁶⁸
- **Pyf [puff]:** a fast-paced game which may be played in teams. Pyf is constructed from several similar games known in England and other countries. I think it is the best fit for the arrangement of the pieces on Zeno's board, and it matches Bell's reconstruction of Zeno's game.
- **Twelve dogs:** a simplified game for children.

Some general principles apply:

- The players take turns to roll the dice and move their pieces around the board according to the scores on the dice.
- The scores constitute separate moves. If a player roll two, five and three, they may move one piece two, five and then three points, but each move must be in itself valid.
- You may move your piece onto a point containing a single piece belonging to your opponent, in which case their piece is removed from the board.
- If your opponent has more than one piece on a point, the point is secured; you may not move your piece onto that point.
- Die rolls must be used if possible; if there is a choice, the player must use the higher roll. Emperor Zeno only used his three rolls because he had to, and it a general principle of the game that you must use the bad rolls as well as the good. The choice of the higher number is from modern backgammon.
- *Tabula* games are race games, unlike tric-trac in which the players score points by achieving various configurations of the pieces as well as by winning the race.
- You may take back your move unless the other player has rolled the dice for their move.

Zeno

I regard *Zeno's game* or *Zeno* as a relatively simple and quick game, played by the casual gamer.

In this reconstruction, setup and direction of play are the same as in *Ludus Anglicorum*.

⁶⁸ I am open to suggestions as to a better name; the Anglo-Saxons are unlikely to have called their own game "The Game of the English", but *Emperador* or *Emperor* would cause confusion with other games, and this is the name we have from Royal 13 A.

Rules

Dice: 3.

Setup: P1: 15 on *a*. P2: 15 on *z*. See Figure 3.

Hits: Single pieces may be ‘hit’ by an opposing piece, and must be re-entered in the player’s start table before any other move may be made: *af* for P1, *tz* for P2⁶⁹.

Movement: P1 *amnz*. P2: *znma*.

Bearing: No bearing.

Victory: The winner is the first player to move all their pieces into the furthest table from their start position.

Comment: in this game there is little opportunity to hit the other player’s pieces. We may be missing some extra rule that makes the game more challenging. Possibilities include:

- special victory conditions?
- unusable rolls pass to the other player?
- something special about the *divus*?

Ludus Anglicorum

This is a sophisticated game, described in detail in both Libro de los Juegos and Royal 13 A. We hypothesise that it had been in play for some time in this form, and the name “the English game” gives it extra credence as a game that may have been played in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Rules

Dice: Roll 3 dice; if none is a six, select any one of them and turn it to be a six. Alternatively roll 2 dice and add an automatic 6 as the third dice.

Setup: P1: 15 on *a*. P2: 15 on *z*. See Figure 3.

Hits: Single pieces may be ‘hit’ by an opposing piece, and must be re-entered in the player’s start table before any other move may be made: *af* for P1, *tz* for P2⁷⁰. However a piece may only be re-entered on an empty point, or one that is occupied by a single opposing piece; this includes the start point (*a* or *z*) on a roll of one.⁷¹

69 The rule that hit pieces must be re-entered before any other move can be made is explicit in Ludus Anglicorum and is part of modern backgammon.

70 The requirement to re-enter a piece before playing any piece on the board is explicit.

71 Royal 13 A is ambiguous “Et sciendum quod ille qui sedet ex parte .am. potest nodare quemlibet punctum in pagina .mg. et in pagina .fa. excepto puncto .a. quum occupatur per duos homines adversarii sui vel plures, et quum non est ibi nisi unus homo tunc potest capere eum.”. In English this may be rendered as “And it should be known that he who sits on the side a.m. you can connect any point on the page .mg. and on the page .fa. with the exception of the point .a. when he is occupied by two or more men of his opponent, and when there is only one man there then can

Movement: P1 *amnz*. P2: *znma*.

Securing points: Only points on the opposite side of the board from their entry table may be secured, meaning that a player may never move a second piece on to any point on the side of the board where their pieces enter. A player's starting point may be secured by their opponent, i.e. P1 may place two or more pieces on *z*, providing P2 has one or fewer pieces on *z*⁷². There is no limit to the number of pieces that may be placed on a secured point.

Bearing: P1 bears *tz*. P2 bears *af*. Bearing is only allowed if all the player's pieces are in the bearing table⁷³. A piece must be borne off by an exact roll unless there are no other pieces on more distant points⁷⁴. For example if the player has a piece on *t* and another on *w*, a roll of 5 may not be used to bear off the piece on *w*, though the piece on *t* may be moved to *z*. If the player has a piece on *w* and no piece on *t* or *u*, they may use the 5 to bear off the piece on *w*.

Victory: The winner is the first player to bear off all their pieces.

Possible house rule: if you throw three dice and the roll includes a six, then you do not change the roll.

Lympolding and lurching

I interpret lympolding and lurching as strategic positions in which one player has gained a major advantage.

- **Lympolding:** a player is lympolded if they have a piece which must be re-entered but no available point on which to enter it, because all points in the start table are either secured by their opponent, or occupied by their own pieces. The lympolded player must skip turns until they are able to re-enter their piece.
- **Lurching:** a player is lurched if there is no legal move because all their pieces have either reached their opponent's start point or are within their own start table and cannot move, being trapped by a blockade of six points by their opponent. The lurched player will skip turns until their opponent opens the blockade.

It may be a house rule to declare an immediate victory in the extreme case where the loser has a single piece on each point in their start table and all their other pieces are on the last point of the

take him." However the writer later clarifies that a stone may be re-entered on *a* with a throw of one, but only if that house is not occupied by one of his own stones, or blocked by the opponent.

⁷² The description of lympolding makes it clear that a player may secure their opponent's start position.

⁷³ The lympolding scenario with pieces piled up on the last point of the bearing board would surely not occur if the player could have borne those pieces off.

⁷⁴ The restriction on "overpaying" to bear off is explicit in *Ludus Anglicorum*.

bearing table, apart from a single piece to be re-entered in the case of lympling. This corresponds to the specific position described in Royal 13 A.

Alternatively, a *lympolded* or *lurched* player may immediately lose the game, as it is very difficult to recover from this position.

Pyf⁷⁵

I propose the game *Pyf* or “Puff” as a composite game that may have been played at Rumwoldstow. Like *Zeno*, it is a casual game, and may be played as a team game.

The games *Paume Carie*, *Buffa de cortesia* and *Pareia de entrada* (paired entry) are sufficiently similar between Alf, K and other manuscripts⁷⁶ to consider that they represent a well known and popular variant. This may indeed have been the game *Zeno* played, if we disregard Agathias’ special terminology.

In all games, both players bring their pieces in on the same table and travel across the board in the same direction, making for a highly dynamic game with plenty of interaction. Key differences are listed below.

- **Pareia de entrada (Alf)** dice: 2 or 3. Doubles may be used twice AND the player has an extra turn.
- **Buffa de cortesia (Alf), Buf (BS), Buffa (CB)** dice: 2 in BS, CB, 3 in Alf. doubles may be used twice AND the player has an extra turn. Any roll which a player cannot use can be played by the opponent.⁷⁷
- **Paume carie v2 (R)** dice: 2. pieces in the bearing field may not be moved except by bearing. *Paume carie* may be played as a team game, with 2 or 3 on a team; all the players on one side play in turn, then all the players on the other.

Rules

Dice: 3⁷⁸

Setup: All pieces start off the board.

Initial entry: Pieces are brought onto table *af* by dice rolls, for example a roll of 1 would allow a piece to be placed on point *a*, a roll of 2 on point *b* etc.

⁷⁵ Although “*Paume carie*” is the name given in ms Royal 13 A, it appears to be French and to refer to the first variant in which a winning team slaps the palms of the losers – which is clearly beneath the dignity of our nuns. “*Pariea de entrada*” is Spanish, and while its translation “Paired entry” is a meaningful name, I have chosen to name this variant *Pyf*, the Old English equivalent of “*Buff*” (puff) to clarify that this variant is a hybrid with inferred rules.

⁷⁶ *Buf*, ms Bonus Socius (1275 AD), *Buffa*, ms Civis Bononiae (~1300 AD)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonus_Socius

<https://collection.beta.fitz.ms/id/object/178358>

https://bckg.pagesperso-orange.fr/english/civis_bononiae.htm

⁷⁷ In the game *Buffa de balrac* pieces may not be moved until the player has brought all their pieces onto the board. In *Buffa de balrac* the players’ pieces enter on different tables; this rule would not seem sensible in games where both players enter their pieces into the same table.

⁷⁸ 3 dice seem to be standard in the earlier games, e.g. *Zeno*’s game.

Hits: Single pieces may be ‘hit’ by an opposing piece, and must be re-entered in table *af* before the player move any other piece⁷⁹.

Movement: Both players move their pieces in direction *amnz*. Pieces in table *tz* may not be moved except by bearing⁸⁰.

Bearing: Both players bear their pieces off in table *tz*. Bearing is only allowed if all the player’s pieces are in table *tz*⁸¹. A piece must be borne off by an exact roll unless there are no other pieces on more distant points⁸².

Victory: The winner is the first player to bear off all their pieces.

Team play: Teams of 2 or 3 per side may play: all the players on one side play in turn, then all the players on the other⁸³. Only 2 dice are rolled.

Optional rules: To be considered through playtesting. Doubles used twice⁸⁴; doubles give an extra turn; any roll which a player cannot use can be used by the opponent.

Twelve dogs

Doze Canes (Alf) or Twelve Dogs is a simple teaching game and something like this may have been played by children in the care of the monastery. Figure 11 shows the game being played by two boys, guided by adults.⁸⁵

The game is played on one table only, and the goal is to enter all your pieces on the board. There is no movement, but blots can be taken and must re-enter. Twelve dogs seems to be on a level with snakes and ladders, in that the player makes no decisions, merely moves according to the dice.

Rules

Dice: 2.

Setup: All pieces start off the board. The player who is to play first chooses the table which is to be used for the game.

Initial entry: Pieces are brought onto table *af* by dice rolls, for example a roll of 1 would allow a piece to be placed on point *a*, a roll of 2 on point *b* etc.⁸⁶ Players enter their pieces in the same direction. Each point may have a maximum of two pieces.

79 The rule that hit pieces must be re-entered before any other move can be made is explicit in Ludus Anglicorum and is part of modern backgammon.

80 Paume carie v2 (R)

81 The rule that all pieces must be in the bearing board is inferred for Zeno’s game, is explicit in Ludus Anglicorum and is part of modern backgammon.

82 The restriction on “overpaying” to bear off is explicit in Ludus Anglicorum and is part of modern backgammon.

83 Paume carie v1 (R)

84 Doubles are more common when rolling with three dice, so may unbalance the game.

85 <https://www.alamy.com/libro-de-juegos-o-libro-del-ajedrez-dados-y-tablas-1283-folio-74r-juego-de-los-doze-canes-o-de-los-doze-hermanos-manuscrito-gotico-author-alfonso-x-of-castile-the-wise-1221-1284-location-monasterio-biblioteca-coleccion-san-lorenzo-del-escorial-madrid-spain-image209102936.html>

86 The author does not specify whether both player enter from the same direction. It makes no practical difference to the game.

Hits: Single pieces may be 'hit' by an opposing piece, and must be re-entered in table *af* before the player can play any other pieces⁸⁷.

Movement: No movement.

Bearing: No bearing.

Victory: The game ends when there are two pieces on each of the six points of the table. The winner is the player who has occupied the most points; the game may be tied.

⁸⁷ The rule that hit pieces must be re-entered before any other move can be made is explicit in *Ludus Anglicorum* and is part of modern backgammon.



Figure 11: Doze Canes (twelve dogs)

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I recommend the wonderful website “The Origin of Backgammon” which provides detailed information and in many cases the contents of most of the sources.

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