



Gothic Dice Found in Norwegian Grave Cairn

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When archaeologists found ancient dice in a Norwegian burial excavation—dating back to pre-Viking times of the **Scandinavian Goths**, they probably felt lucky.^{1,2}

Last month, Norwegian archaeologists chose to excavate the remains of a small early Iron Age grave cairn in western Norway. Dotted with monuments and grave mounds, the scenic location overlooking Alversund played an important role in Norwegian history. The site at Ytre Fosse turned out to be a cremation patch. Amidst the fragments of pottery and burnt glass, archaeologists found a surprise: rare Roman Iron Age dice and board game pieces.¹

So, what are the odds that such a lucky find would be discovered in Norway?

The fact that archaeologists, as well as others, are discovering buried treasures dating to ancient times is not itself rare in Norway. Recent news has reported buried finds of Viking weaponry, clothing, hunting equipment, trade routes, and even dinosaur remains.^{3, 4, 5}

But an almost complete set of gaming dice from the Roman Iron Age era (when the Scandinavia-originated **Goths**, a/k/a “Geats”, were active in Europe) is rare indeed.

“This is wonderfully exciting. Such discoveries have not been made so many times before in Norway or Scandinavia. The special thing here is that we have found almost the whole set including the dice,” said Morten Ramstad from Bergen University Museum to NRK [i.e., *Norsk rikskringkasting*, which translates in meaning to ‘Norwegian Government Broadcasting’].¹

A 1,700-year-old board game, including rare elongated dice, dating back to the Roman Iron Age has been unearthed in Norway. Found near an important sea route, the game was likely used to forge relationships among long-distance traders.⁶

What were these gaming pieces like?

A total of 18 distinct playing pieces, similar to chips used in checkers, were found in a circular pit at the Ytre Fosse site in western Norway, according to a press release put out by the University of Bergen. The pit was filled with black, greasy charcoal, within which archaeologists found a number of charred items, including bits of bone, pottery jars, a bronze needle, and some burnt glass. Taken together, this is evidence of a cremation pit, in which a high-ranking individual was burned in a bonfire while surrounded by these grave goods.⁶

American board games have used dice for generations. However, the dice that we know best are cube-shaped, with each of the flat surfaces featuring a number—the options being one through six. However, these Roman era dice are shaped like planks, each featuring only one number—with one option being a zero.

The [gaming/gambling] pieces are of a very rare type, known to be from the Roman Iron Age, dated to around AD 300. The haul included 13 whole and five broken game chips along with an almost completely intact elongated dice. The dice is marked with number symbols in the form of point circles and have the values zero, three, four and five. Less than 15 of these have been found in Norway. Similar dice were found in the famous Vimose weapon-offering site at Fyn in Denmark.¹

But why are dice (or some other form of castable “lots”) so popular generation after generation? Rolling dice (or “casting lots”) is a form of determining an outcome by what appears to be “chance” within the context of probability/permutations statistics.⁷

But, ultimately, is this really governed by random chance? In the ultimate analysis, is there anything important that occurs or that exists—now or ever—that is truly produced just by luck?⁸

The Bible answers no. Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” In fact, casting lots is a practice sometimes used to discern truth that only God can provide, as is illustrated by imperiled sailors when Jonah tried to flee from God,⁹ and also illustrated by the eleven New Testament apostles when trying to decide who should replace Judas Iscariot.¹⁰

Moreover, Roman soldiers cast lots to decide who would get to have some of Christ’s clothing at His crucifixion.¹¹

So, rolling dice—or casting lots—has been part of historic events in world history, to say the least.

In fact, discerning whether a strange situation is caused by “luck” or by the intentional actions of someone, such as God Himself, can be part of an important historic event.

Concurrent calamities began when the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant from Israel, took it to the city of Ashdod, and put it inside the temple of Dagon, their national god. Inexplicably, the idolatrous statue of Dagon, which had seemed safe and secure, suffered vandalism. Many Philistines died from some mysterious disease, and the bodies of others who survived grew “tumors” or “buboes.” A flood of rats plagued Philistine lands. Why were these extraordinary events striking Ashdod simultaneously? Were they connected?

In a bizarre response to the emergency, Philistine goldsmiths made replicas of the disease symptoms—and of the rats they suspected as the culprits. (Ironically, the rat sculptures may indicate that some Philistines

mistook the affliction to be hemorrhoids when it was actually the bubonic plague, transmitted by infected rats and their fleas.)

Worse than underestimating the symptoms, the Philistine experts were irrationally slow to recognize God’s providential hand in the plague. Seven months after the capture of the Ark, they devised an experiment to test whether the Ark of the Covenant was connected to Israel’s God being displeased with Philistia (as opposed to the recent strange events being merely “coincidental”).

“Now therefore, make a new cart, take two milk cows which have never been yoked, and hitch the cows to the cart; and take their calves home, away from them. Then take the ark of the LORD and set it on the cart; and put the articles of gold which you are returning to Him as a trespass offering in a chest by its side. Then send it away, and let it go. And watch: if it goes up the road to its own territory, to Beth-Shemesh, then He has done us this great evil. But if not, then we shall know that it is not His hand that struck us—it happened to us by chance [i.e., ‘bad luck’].”

By chance? Like modern evolutionary naturalists, the Philistines tried to tilt (i.e., bias) their “test” results to suggest that their troubles were caused by random “coincidences”—just a series of “bad luck” unrelated to their blasphemous actions that outrageously insulted Israel’s God.

But it eventually became obvious to the Philistines in the afflicted communities of Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron that they were experiencing God’s “heavy hand.” Four *not-so-random* coincidences—insulting the Ark of the Covenant followed by Dagon’s broken idol, many Philistine deaths, many Philistines afflicted with tumors, and ravaging rats—confronted the Philistines with inescapable proof of God’s judgment.

[Quoting James J. S. Johnson, “Evolutionary Naturalism vs. Biblical Providence: Philistine Blasphemers Plagued by Rats!”, **Acts & Facts**, 45(4):21 (April 2016), posted at <https://www.icr.org/article/evolutionary-naturalism-vs-biblical> .]

Of course, most instances of such gaming pieces never became part of any important history events. For most who roll dice, only recreation is involved. Although, some roll dice to gamble for money or some other tangible prize.

But this Ytre Fosse dig-site find is extraordinary, so its value is gauged by its antiquity and rarity—1,700 years old, found far north from Rome, up in Norway!

Other recreational board games are known to Nordic archaeologists, especially the Viking version of chess called *hnefatafl*. This Viking chess game became popular centuries after the date of this relevant dice discovery.^{1,12}

These games are an early relative of the more famous board game Hnefatafl played during the Viking Age. The strategy game was likely played for enjoyment or even strategic training on long ocean voyages. Hnefatafl pieces found recently on Lindisfarne [and earlier at Hebridean Lewis] suggest Vikings travelled with the game.¹

So, perchance, were the Norwegian archaeologists really “lucky” when they recently found the ancient Roman Iron Age era dice?

References

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2. MacDowell, Simon, *The Goths: Conquerors of the Roman Empire* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Military Books, 2017), 1-28 and 137-149, especially pages 1-3 and 137-138.
3. Johnson, James J. S. Norwegians Find Viking Grave under House Floor. *Creation Science Update*. Posted on ICR.org May 31, 2020.
4. Johnson, J. J. S. 2020. Norwegian Rats, Archaeologists, and Plagues of the Past. *Creation Science Update*. Posted on ICR.org April 30, 2020.
5. Clarey, Timothy, & James J. S. Johnson. 2019. Deep-Sea Dinosaur Fossil Buries Evolution. *Acts & Facts*. 48(8): 10-13 (August 2019).
6. Dvorsky, G. 2020. Ancient Roman Board Game Found in Norwegian Burial Mound. *Gizmodo*. Posted on gizmodo.com June 10, 2020.

7. Unless the dice are somehow prepared or used dishonestly, rolling dice (or casting lots) seems to be unbiased among game players—and thus fair. See **Proverbs 18:18**.

8. Undirected chance, even with infinite time, cannot produce our universe just by lucky accidents, because biochemical entropy is a universal reality governing and degrading our material universe. See Johnson, James J. S. 2018. Infinite Time Won't Rescue Evolution. *Acts & Facts*. 47(6):21 (June 2018). See also McCombs, Charles. 2004. Evolution Hopes You Don't Know Chemistry: The Problem with Chirality. *Acts & Facts*. 33(5): 1-4 (May 2004).

9. Jonah 1:7. For another Old Testament example, see 1 Samuel 14:42. Likewise, Philistine idolaters experimented, to discern whether calamities were displays of God's anger—as opposed to results of undirected chance (just bad luck). See Johnson, James J. S. 2016. Evolutionary Naturalism Biblical Providence: Philistine Blasphemers Plagued by Rats! *Acts & Facts*. 45(4):21 (April 2016).

10. **Acts 1:26**.

11. “They said therefore among themselves, ‘Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be’, that the Scripture might be fulfilled which says: ‘They divided My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.’ Therefore the soldiers did these things.” John 19:24, reporting fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy in Psalms 22:18. Likewise, see Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24.

12. Nikel, D. 2020. Rare Viking Era Board Game Piece Discovered on Lindisfarne. *Forbes*. Posted on Forbes.com February 7, 2020.



Archeologists searching for Scandinavian Goth artifacts (University of Bergen photo credit)