

Gambling and Gaming in the Holy Land: Chess, Dice and Other Games in the Sources of the Crusades

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Abstract

Relying primarily on Latin chronicles, but also referring to other types of evidence such as archaeological finds or manuscript illuminations, the article examines representations of gambling in the Middle East, particularly in the Latin States, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Gambling (defined here as playing dice, chess or other games with money or property changing hands as a result) transcended many boundaries, and the ranks of gamblers included both laymen and clerics; rich and poor; men and women; Muslims and Christians. The article demonstrates that, for the Latin chroniclers, the most serious problem of gambling in the context of the crusades was its tendency to distract from the war effort. Fondness for gambling also accompanied other – more serious – vices such as lust, which could equally detract from one’s ability to fulfill one’s military duties. As an “entry vice,” gambling was hardly compatible with the perceived need of the crusaders as milites Christi to adhere to higher moral standards. As a result, there were attempts to impose limitations on gambling, in terms of who could play, which games, and when.

Boredom during downtime is an experience familiar to soldiers throughout history. From early on, games of the type which, to quote a thirteenth-century Spanish manual of games, “are played while sitting” were one of the most common ways for combatants to fill free time.¹ It is not by accident that, from Antiquity on, myths connected the invention of specific games with warfare. According to Sophocles, for instance, Palamedes invented dice during the siege of Troy.² The propensity of

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¹ “The Books of Chess, Dice and Backgammon” (*Libros de ajedrez, dados y tablas*), trans. in John Esten Keller, *Alfonso X, El Sabio* (New York, 1967), 148. For recent studies of this text, see Olivia Remie Constable, “Chess and Courtly Culture in Medieval Castile: The *Libro de ajedrez* of Alfonso X el Sabio,” *Speculum* 82 (2007): 301–47; Jens T. Wollesen, “Sub specie ludi...: Text and Images in Alfonso El Sabio’s *Libro de acedrex, dados e tablas*,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 53 (1990): 277–308.

² Roger Goossens, “L’invention des jeux,” *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 30 (1952): 146–56. A medieval tradition attributed the invention of chess also to Palamedes at Troy: see Richard Eales, *Chess. The History of the Game* (London, 1985), 40.

soldiers to play games has survived till modern time, with recent news featuring video games being sent to coalition soldiers in Afghanistan.³

The crusaders and settlers in the Latin States – most of whom, in common with inhabitants of any frontier society, had direct experience of military conflict – were no exception, and the sources contain a number of references to them playing games, which usually involved dice. In fact, tradition connected “hazard,” the most famous medieval game involving dice, directly to the crusades; according to the French translation of William of Tyre, it was invented by crusaders during the siege of a Syrian castle of the same name.⁴ Crusaders were also familiar with chess, although references to the game are less common than to dice. Archaeological evidence paints a picture somewhat different from the written sources: there is no trace of chess having been played, but thirteen game boards for Nine Men’s Morris (a strategy game related to tic-tac-toe) were found in various locations.⁵ In the Middle Ages, playing games – including chess – tended to imply property changing hands as a result of the outcome, which is the basic definition of gambling.⁶ Gaming and gambling on the crusades transcended a number of social boundaries: the ranks of players included the rich and the poor, clergy and laymen, men and women. The sources of the crusades also depict Muslims playing games, predominantly chess.

While the history of chess has profited from a number of studies, the subject of gambling has attracted relatively few scholars.⁷ Even in the field of archaeology,

³ “Video games headed to soldiers in Afghanistan” CBC News. At <http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2010/11/22/video-games-canadian-forces.html> (accessed on 20 August 2011).

⁴ *Guillaume de Tyr et ses Continuators, texte français du XIII^e siècle*, ed. Paulin Paris (Paris, 1879), 229. See also “A Note on Hazard” in Franz Rosenthal, *Gambling in Islam* (Leiden, 1975), 172–78.

⁵ Two game boards from the crusading period were discovered in each of the following locations: Vadum Jacob, Château Pèlerin (‘Atlit), Belvoir and Bethgibelin. One game board was found in each of four other locations: Arsuf, Mons Gaudii, Nazareth, the Abbey of Bethany and Church of the Resurrection at Abu Ghosh (Castellum Emaus) (Adrian Boas, private communication, 28 February 2012); see also Adrian Boas, *Archaeology of the Military Orders: A Survey of the Urban Centres, Rural Settlement and Castles of the Military Orders in the Latin East (c. 1120–1291)* (London, 2006), 203–04; idem, *Crusader Archaeology: The Material Culture of the Latin East* (London and New York, 1999), 168–70, 188; Michael Sebbane, “Board Games: A Crusader Pastime,” in *Knights of the Holy Land: The Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem*, ed. Silvia Rozenberg (Jerusalem, 1999), 286–91; Denys Pringle, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: A Corpus*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1993–2009), 1:15.

⁶ Murray argues: “Probably there was no game played in the Middle Ages in which it was not the ordinary rule to increase the interest by this simple device of attaching a prize to the victory and a penalty to the defeat ... Chess is often now played without a stake, but in the Middle Ages the absence of a stake usually calls for remark as something unusual;” H. J. R. Murray, *A History of Chess* (London, 1913), 474–75; see also *ibid.*, 412–13. For a recent theoretical discussion of gambling, see Gerda Reith, *The Age of Chance: Gambling in Western Culture* (London, 1999).

⁷ Rare exceptions include: David G. Schwartz, *The History of Gambling: Roll the Bones* (New York, 2006); Dwayne E. Carpenter, “Fickle Fortune: Gambling in Medieval Spain,” *Studies in Philology* 85 (1988): 267–78; and H. J. R. Murray, *A History of Board-Games Other than Chess* (Oxford, 1952). On chess in the Middle Ages, in addition to studies cited above, see Jenny Adams, *Power Play: The Literature and Politics of Chess in the Late Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2006); Olle Ferm and Volker Honemann, eds., *Chess and Allegory in the Middle Ages* (Münster, 2005); Richard Eales, “The Game of

game boards and pieces are often neglected; they “are rarely collected, do not appear in catalogues, and are not publicized.”⁸ Thomas Cavanagh attempted to explain this gap: “Gambling, in terms of cultural significance, is as invisible as it is ubiquitous. Most often dismissed as one of the little things in life, it is assumed to be unimportant and unchanging.”⁹ Yet, people did not always gamble in the same way and their attitudes towards gambling – despite the existence of some constants that reappear time and again – also varied.

The present article will focus primarily on the ways in which Latin chroniclers depicted gambling in the Holy Land. These chroniclers represent a very particular segment of the population: for the most part, they were well-educated clerics and, consequently, steeped both in theology and in Greco-Roman tradition, where references to gambling were frequent. However, even if the views of intellectual elites had a limited influence on behavior (they hardly stopped anyone from gambling), it is likely that their views percolated, at least to some extent, to the rest of the medieval society.

The topic of attitudes towards gambling in Latin sources of the crusades belongs to the larger one of gambling in the Middle Ages, but there are some significant peculiarities to justify it being treated separately. One particularity has to do with the absence of references to gambling in the tavern, a relatively frequent *topos* in medieval literature.¹⁰ There are, on the other hand, a relatively large number of references to gambling and military action, particularly sieges. Another peculiarity is that the sources depict gambling as a favorite pastime that both Christians and Muslims had in common.¹¹ The final – and most important – idiosyncrasy of

Chess: An Aspect of Medieval Knightly Culture,” in *The Ideals and Practice of Medieval Knighthood*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill and Ruth Harvey (Woodbridge, 1986), 12–34; Harry Golombek, *A History of Chess* (London, 1976). For the medieval game of rithmomachia, see Ann E. Moyer, *The Philosopher’s Game: Rithmomachia in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Ann Arbor, 2001). For visual representations of game-playing in the Middle Ages, see Meredith Parsons-Lillich, “The Tric-Trac Window of Le Mans,” *The Art Bulletin* 65 (1983): 23–33; William L. Tronzo, “Moral Hieroglyphs: Chess and Dice at San Savino in Piacenza,” *Gesta* 16 (1977): 15–26. On the cultural significance of play, see Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (New York, 1950); Roger Callois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (New York, 1961); and Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” in idem, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), 412–53.

⁸ Sebbane, “Board Games: A Crusader Pastime,” 287.

⁹ Thomas M. Cavanagh, *Dice, Cards, Wheels: A Different History of French Culture* (Philadelphia, 2005), 1.

¹⁰ Cavanagh, *Dice, Cards, Wheels*, 30–48; Andrew Cowell, *At Play in the Tavern: Signs, Coins, and Bodies in the Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor, 1999).

¹¹ On gaming and gambling in Muslim societies, see Rosenthal, *Gambling in Islam*; Murray, *A History of Chess*, 186–365. On chess in Byzantium, see Murray, *A History of Chess*, 161–68. According to Anna Comnena, “When the emperor [Alexius] woke up in the early afternoon, he liked sometimes to play chess with one of his kinsmen; it sweetened the bitterness of his many worries”; Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter (1969; reprint London, 2003), 383. Another Byzantine Emperor, Alexius IV Angelus, played dice in very different circumstances. According to Niketas Choniates, during the stay of crusaders in Constantinople in 1203–04, Alexius “crossed over to the tents of the barbarians, where he engaged in drinking bouts and passed the day playing at dice.” The fact that the Emperor

gambling in the Holy Land has to do with the nature of crusading as “holy war.” Crusaders were supposed to be worthy of victory in the eyes of God, whose work they claimed to be doing, hence celebration of mass, confession of sins and chasing away prostitutes were all part of preparation for battle.¹² In this context, in the eyes of the chroniclers, gambling became more problematic than it would have been if crusaders were ordinary soldiers.

The sources of the crusades highlight a number of reasons why gambling was a problem for either a crusader or a settler in the Latin States. First, propensity for gambling was indicative of a variety of destructive traits. William of Tyre refers to interest in gambling in the brief portraits of several of the leaders of the Latin States that he includes in his chronicle. According to William, Raymond of Antioch and King Baldwin III of Jerusalem were both inveterate gamblers. Raymond was “far too fond of vicious games of dice and chance.”¹³ Baldwin III (if only in his *adolescentia*, before amending his ways) also indulged in dice “more than befitted royal majesty.”¹⁴ This predilection was not just an innocent quirk, but went hand in hand with serious faults of character. Raymond had “a rash disposition” and “a habit of acting on a hasty impulse;” “he frequently gave way to anger without restraint or reason,” “was seldom lucky” and “paid no attention to the oath of fealty which he had sworn to the patriarch.”¹⁵ Baldwin III, “in pursuit of the desires of the flesh . . . is said to have dishonored the marriage ties of others.”¹⁶ William does not draw an explicit connection between gambling and these serious faults: rashness, unrestrained anger, lack of luck and oath-breaking in the case of Raymond of Antioch; and debauchery in the case of young Baldwin III. However, it is likely that he expected the reader to do so, especially with Baldwin III, since medieval sources often link together gambling and sexual transgression.¹⁷

The problem with gambling was not only that it made crusaders less morally upright and, hence, less worthy in the eyes of God. It also made them unaware of or uninterested in what was happening around them, often with disastrous consequences. In 1138, Raymond of Antioch and Joscelin II of Edessa participated in the siege of Shaizar led by Emperor John II Comnenus. According to William of Tyre, while the Emperor dedicated himself to the siege, giving himself “no

was playing dice with them led the Latins to lose all respect for him: “His playfellows, removing the gold-inlaid and bejewelled diadem from his head, put it on their own”: Niketas Choniates, *O City of Byzantium*, trans. Harry J. Magoulias (Detroit, 1984), 305.

¹² James Brundage, “Prostitution, Miscegenation and Sexual Purity in the First Crusade,” in *CS*, 57–64.

¹³ WT, 14.21, p. 659; William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, trans. Emily Atwater Babcock and A. C. Krey (New York, 1943), 2:80.

¹⁴ WT, 16.2, p. 716; William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, 2:138–39.

¹⁵ WT, 14.21, p. 659; William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, 2:80.

¹⁶ WT, 16.2, p. 716; William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, 2:138–39.

¹⁷ While gamblers were prone to a series of other vices, this does not mean that all non-gamblers were necessarily virtuous. According to William of Tyre, King Amaury of Jerusalem had no interest in either “games of chance” or theater, but he still was rumored to have “abandoned himself without restraints to the sins of the flesh and to have seduced married women”: WT, 19.2, p. 865.

rest – not even to take food,” Raymond and Joscelin demonstrated little fervor for the undertaking:

while others were engaged in strenuous conflict, the prince [Raymond] and the count [Joscelin], both young men, let themselves be drawn away by the frivolous pursuits common to men of their years. They were continually playing at games of chance to the great detriment of their own interests. Moreover, by this lack of interest in warlike pursuits, they influenced others to take a less active part in the siege.

Disgusted and angered by his allies' behavior, John raised the siege.¹⁸

Curiously, while William of Tyre writes about “games of chance,” thirteenth-century illustrations of the episode depict Raymond and Joscelin playing chess. In this case then, dice and chess were interchangeable as examples of sinful (or, at least, wasteful) pastime. A number of thirteenth-century manuscripts of William of Tyre's *History of Outremer* include an image of a mounted unit of Christian knights charging equally mounted Muslims with the walls of Shaizar in the background. Immediately below, there is a representation of Emperor John, on horseback, approaching a large tent in which two or more men, presumably including Raymond and Joscelin, are playing chess. The aim of the two images is to underline the shamefulness of Raymond's and Joscelin's behavior by contrasting it with that of knights dutifully fighting the Muslims immediately above.¹⁹

A similar incident occurred in 1177, when Count Philip of Flanders besieged the castle of Harim. According to William of Tyre, Philip and his knights “paid more attention to games of chance and other evil pleasures than military discipline or the rules of siege operation permitted.” In addition, “they were continually going back and forth to Antioch, where they spent their time at the baths and at banquets and indulged in drunken debauches and other pleasures of the flesh, thereby forsaking the work of the siege for the delights of idleness.”²⁰ As a result, distracted by gambling and a series of other sinful activities, the count of Flanders never managed to complete the siege.

In other cases, gambling could have even more serious consequences, for Muslims as well as Christians. Raymond of Aguilers records that Kerbogha of Mosul amused himself with chess while besieging crusaders at Antioch in 1098, during the First Crusade. He “played chess in his tent” when he “learned that the Franks were marching out to fight.” The news caught Kerbogha unawares, as he did not expect the crusaders to have the courage to face him in battle. According to Raymond, Kerbogha was “troubled in his soul at this unexpected move” and, instead of attacking the crusaders as they were leaving the city – the moment when they were particularly vulnerable to attack – he allowed them to “march

¹⁸ WT, 15.1–2, pp. 675–76; William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, 2:95–96.

¹⁹ Jaroslav Folda, *Crusader Manuscript Illumination at Saint-Jean d'Acre, 1275–1291* (Princeton, 1976), 32–35, plate 13; Hugo Buchthal, *Miniature Painting in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Oxford, 1957), plate 133c; Sebbane, “Board Games: A Crusader Pastime,” plate 1.

²⁰ WT, 21.24, p. 994; William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, 2:434.

out unmolested.”²¹ It is possible that Raymond’s mention of Kerbogha playing chess was just an attempt to set the scene. However, it is likely that he implied that Kerbogha, preoccupied with chess, was not as alert as he should have been and did not react to the new circumstances quickly enough.

If Kerbogha’s love of chess might have led to his defeat in a key battle, another Muslim leader, sultan al-Salih Ayyub of Egypt, apparently paid for his habit of playing chess with his life. According to Joinville, in 1249, an enemy of al-Salih bribed the sultan’s servant to place poison on the mat where the sultan would recline each day to play chess. The sultan had an open sore on his leg and played bare-legged. On the contact between the sore and the mat, the poison entered his body and caused partial paralysis and eventual death.²² Although chess was not directly responsible for the sultan’s demise, it seems that, according to Joinville, he put himself in danger by his regular habit of playing the game.

These two references to Muslims playing games are not unique in Latin sources. Two other chroniclers mention sets of board games as luxury goods that freely change hands between Christian and Muslim owners as booty or as gifts. According to Albert of Aachen, when crusaders captured Antioch, they discovered “many purple garments of different kinds and colors, also pepper and very many spices, the gentiles’ clothes and tents, gaming pieces and dice.”²³ According to Joinville, the Old Man of the Mountain – the leader of the Assassins – sent King Louis IX a number of presents, including “an elephant very finely made of crystal, an animal called a giraffe also made of crystal, apples from various kinds of crystal, and backgammon and chess sets.”²⁴

It was not only Kerbogha and the sultan of Egypt, who suffered because of their love of games. The same happened to their Christian enemies. Some sources appear to fall into the logical fallacy of *cum hoc ergo propter hoc* (“correlation proves causation”). For example, William of Tyre mentions that when Raymond II of Tripoli was killed by the Assassins, King Baldwin III of Jerusalem, “free from care, was enjoying himself over a game of dice in the city, unconscious of all that had happened.”²⁵ From our perspective, Baldwin’s activities during the assassination had little relation to the disaster, since it would have been difficult for him to avert it. Still, William’s narrative of the event seems to imply that, preoccupied with

²¹ Raymond of Aguilers, *Le ‘Liber’ de Raymond d’Aguilers*, ed. John Hugh Hill and Laurita L. Hill (Paris, 1969), 80; Raymond d’Aguilers, *Historia Francorum qui ceperunt Iherusalem*, trans. John Hugh Hill and Laurita L. Hill (Philadelphia, 1968), 62. For an analysis of this episode, see John France, *Victory in the East: A Military History of the First Crusade* (Cambridge, 1996), 289–90; R. C. Smail, *Crusading Warfare (1097–1193)* (Cambridge, 1976 [1956]), 172.

²² Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, ed. and trans. Jacques Monfrin (Paris, 1998), 70–71; Joinville, *The Life of Saint Louis*, trans. M. R. B. Shaw (London 1963), 200.

²³ Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana: History of the Journey to Jerusalem*, 4.25, ed. and trans. Susan B. Edgington (Oxford, 2007), 285.

²⁴ Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, 224–25; Joinville, *The Life of Saint Louis*, 278.

²⁵ WT, 17.19, p. 787; William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, 2:214.

a game, Baldwin – like Kerbogha or al-Salih – was not as vigilant as he should have been.

The most revealing story, illuminating the dangers of gambling, is found in the chronicle of the First Crusade written by Albert of Aachen. Albert's account contains two themes that come up in other crusading sources dealing with gambling: namely, gambling as a dangerous distraction and gambling as closely associated with sexual misconduct. While the crusaders were besieging Antioch, some of them grew "somewhat unconcerned with warlike things" and took to dicing to pass the time. One day, a certain Adalbero – "a very high-born young man of royal blood" and the archdeacon of the church of Metz – was playing dice "with a certain woman of great birth and beauty in a pleasure garden full of apple trees." A group of fellow crusaders acted as judges of the game. While this was going on, the Turks sneaked out of the city and "attacked with a sudden shout the archdeacon and the woman playing with him, catching them unaware and by surprise." With their arrows, they also "scattered and wounded" the attendants "who now forgot about dice games in their fear." The Turks cut off Adalbero's head and took it with them, while they also

seized the woman alive and unhurt by force of arms and dragged her into the city, where they tormented her all night with the unchaste intercourse of their excessive lust, showing no kindness towards her. At last they led the woman they had abused with this very abominable and most wicked coition to the ramparts and they put her to death.

They then placed the two heads (the woman was apparently beheaded as well) in a mangonel and hurled them from the walls. Godfrey of Bouillon recognized Adalbero's head and had it buried together with his body.²⁶

In his discussion of this episode, Norman Housley described the initial scene in the garden as a "bizarre *mise en scène*" and inquired whether "playing dice" was a euphemism or a "genuine activity."²⁷ Given the presence of several witnesses, there is no reason to assume that by "playing dice" Albert meant something else. However, there are many elements in the story implying impropriety, such as the beauty of the woman, emphasized by Albert, or the apple orchard where the game is taking place (an obvious allusion to the Garden of Eden and to the Fall of Adam and Eve). Albert's narrative appears to prefigure the many romances and *chansons de geste* that feature an amorous game – albeit of chess, rather than of dice – between a man and a woman. Tristan played chess with Isault; Lancelot with Guenevere.²⁸ Albert's attitude towards the playing couple, however, is unambiguously that of

²⁶ Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, 3.46, pp. 208–11.

²⁷ Norman Housley, *Fighting for the Cross* (New Haven, 2008), 174–75.

²⁸ "Taxonomies of Desire in *Les Echechs amoureux*," in Adams, *Power Play*, 57–94; Kristin Juel, "Chess, Love, and the Rhetoric of Distraction in Medieval French Narrative," *Romance Philology* 64 (2010): 73–97; Thomas Rendall, "Gawain and the Game of Chess," *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 27 (1992): 186–99; Eales, "The Game of Chess," 31–32. For gambling in Islamic love poetry, see Rosenthal, *Gambling in Islam*, 128–37.

disapproval. He does not represent the two players as innocent victims, but appears to imply that, by engaging in a game of dice, they themselves were responsible for initiating the course of events that led to the rape of the woman and the execution of both of them.

Yet, even though Latin chroniclers tended to view gambling by *militēs Christi* in a negative light, there were few attempts to set limits to it. To my knowledge, the only general ban on crusaders gambling has to do with the crusading plans of King Henry II of England, which were never realized. According to Roger of Hoveden, in 1188, in preparation for the expedition, the king made an attempt to ensure high moral standards of the entire crusading army. He banned “swearing profanely”; wearing of expensive clothes (“beaver, or gris [grey fur], or sable or scarlet”) and excessive eating (“all were to be content with two dishes”). At least in part to prevent the presence of prostitutes, he also stipulated that women were not supposed to accompany the crusaders, “unless, perhaps, some laundress . . . about whom no suspicion could be entertained.” Finally, he made it clear that “no one should play at games of chance or at dice.” According to Henry II, as related by Roger of Howden, the pattern of behavior considered sinful included swearing, ostentatious display of wealth, gluttony, fornication and gambling.²⁹

Although Henry’s was the only known attempt to ban gambling on a crusade altogether, there were more limited attempts to regulate the activity. The Templars, for instance, who were supposed to adhere to higher moral standards than ordinary crusaders, could not play the majority of common games. In his *Praise of the New Knighthood*, Bernard of Clairvaux described the Templar knights:

No arrogant word, no idle deed, no unrestrained laugh, not even the slightest whisper or murmur is left uncorrected once it has been detected. They foreswear dice and chess, they abhor the hunt; they take no delight, as is customary, in the ridiculous cruelty of falconry.³⁰

Bernard paints a negative portrait of a knight – arrogant, idle, overly jovial, enjoying hunting and falconry, dice and chess – and claims that the Templars had nothing in common with him.

The French *Rule of the Temple*, a composite text of which the oldest extant manuscript dates from the early thirteenth century, did not contradict Bernard’s description. According to the Rule, the Templars were not allowed to play chess (*eschas*), backgammon (*tables*) or an enigmatic game called *echançons*. However,

²⁹ Roger of Howden, *Chronica*, ed. William Stubbs, RS 51 (London, 1868–71), 2:336–37; *The Annals of Roger de Hoveden*, trans. Henry T. Riley (1853; reprint Felinfach, 1997), 2/1:80–81. At the same time, Henry stipulated that “no person was to have his clothes in rags or torn,” probably with the aim of limiting the number of non-combatants.

³⁰ Bernard of Clairvaux, *De laude novae militiae*, in *S. Bernardi opera*, ed. Jean Leclercq et al., vol. 3 (Rome, 1963), 220; Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood: A Treatise on the Knights Templar and the Holy Places of Jerusalem*, trans. M. Conrad Greenia (Kalamazoo, 2000), 46.

the knights were permitted to play Nine Men's Morris (*marelles*), albeit "for pleasure without placing wagers."³¹

Archaeological evidence shows that the Templars did take advantage of their right to play Nine Men's Morris. Two game boards have been uncovered at the Templar castle of Vadum Jacob and two more at another Templar castle, that of Château Pèlerin ('Atlit). One of the boards at Château Pèlerin has been incised in the plaster of a flat roof of the stables.³² Six bone dice have also been found at Château Pèlerin (although, of course, it is difficult to know whether it was the Templars or the non-Templar residents or visitors of the castle who used them).³³ Finally, it is possible that tokens found at a number of castles were used in gambling, although it is also likely that they functioned as unofficial currency.³⁴

Other military orders also tried to limit gambling by their members. The statutes of the Knights Hospitaller in 1262 had a somewhat perplexing rule regarding chess:

It is decreed for the brethren, who are in the Infirmary and play chess or read romances or eat forbidden food, that the brethren should not give them anything of the Infirmary from that time forward, and they should undergo no other penalty.³⁵

The statutes then associate gambling with idleness and gluttony. It is not clear whether the Hospitallers had the right to play chess outside the Infirmary. The statutes of the Hospitallers, however, were unambiguous about dice. The ones made in 1268 at Acre forbade "that anyone should play dice on Christmas-eve, or at any other time."³⁶ This suggests that some Hospitallers tried to use Christmas celebrations as an excuse for frivolous entertainment.

Although the statutes do not mention Nine Men's Morris, archaeological finds indicate that, like the Templars, the Hospitallers also played this game. Two game boards have been found in the kitchen of the Hospitaller castle of Belvoir and another at Hospitaller Bethgibelin.³⁷ The location of the finds at Belvoir might be significant. One of the two game boards was incised into the underside of a stone mortar, which, as Adrian Boas has suggested, "if necessary could easily be hidden

³¹ According to the French Rule, a Templar had the right to place wagers in some circumstances (for instance, "on a horse"), but the wager had to be nominal, something "which does not cost him or anyone else money, like an open lantern, or wooden mallet, or camping or tent pegs ...": *La Règle du Temple*, ed. Henri de Curzon (Paris, 1886), 184–85; *The Rule of the Templars: The French Text of the Rule of the Order of the Knights Templar*, trans. J. M. Upton-Ward (Woodbridge, 1992), 89–90.

³² Boas, *Crusader Archaeology*, 169; idem, *Archaeology of the Military Orders*, 203.

³³ Boas, *Crusader Archaeology*, 170.

³⁴ Boas, *Crusader Archaeology*, 188; idem, *Archaeology of the Military Orders*, 204.

³⁵ *The Rule, Statutes and Customs of the Hospitallers, 1099–1310*, ed. E. J. King (London, 1934), 64.

³⁶ *The Rule, Statutes and Customs of the Hospitallers*, 78. The Knights of Calatrava, a Castilian order closely related to the Templars, were forbidden to play dice, but not chess. Both the Knights of Calatrava and the Knights of St. John are depicted playing chess in the illustrations to "The Books of Chess, Dice and Backgammon" (*Libros de ajedrez, dados y tablas*), which King Alfonso X of Castile had translated from Arabic into Latin in 1283 (Escorial, Ms. T.I.6, fol. 25 v): Constable, "Chess and Courtly Culture," 314–15.

³⁷ Boas, *Crusader Archaeology*, 169.

by turning it over.”³⁸ Michael Sebbane, however, argued that there is no evidence of attempting to cover up any gaming activity, but that, simply, “the cooks and the staff who worked in the place played games during their spare time,” when they did not need the mortar.³⁹ It is possible to speculate that, at Belvoir, only the cooks and the kitchenhands played Nine Men’s Morris. However, at Bethgibelin, the game board was incised into one of the pillars “which have been cut lengthways and used as tables in the refectory.” Thus, at Bethgibelin, playing took place very much in the open. According to Boas, “this can only lead us to conclude that these games [Nine Men’s Morris] were not always frowned upon.”⁴⁰

The two military orders indicate that there was no attempt to ban games outright, but to place limits upon gaming. Similarly, for King Louis IX of France, there was a “proper” and an “improper” time for gambling. In 1250, when Louis was sailing from Egypt to Acre after being liberated from captivity, he was incensed when he saw his brother Charles of Anjou engaged in a game of backgammon with Walter of Nemours. The king was still mourning the death of his brother Robert of Artois, recently killed in battle, and considered that Charles should be doing the same. According to Joinville, “Weak as he was through illness, his Majesty tottered towards the players. He snatched up dice and boards, flung the whole lot into the sea, and scolded his brother very soundly for taking to gambling so soon.” Joinville added a touch of humor to this episode, describing how Walter of Nemours, who had no brother to mourn, quickly reacted to the king’s anger by tipping all the money on the table – “and there was plenty of it” – into the lap of his gown and carrying it off.⁴¹

As there was an “improper” time to gamble, there was also an “improper” amount to bet while gambling. According to Roger of Howden, when Philip Augustus and Richard Lionheart wintered in Sicily during the Third Crusade in 1190–91, they made an agreement restricting the amount that crusaders could lose while gambling. Knights and the clergy were limited to 20 shillings per day, on pain of a fine of 100 shillings. Ordinary soldiers could not gamble at all unless they had a permission of kings, archbishops, earls or barons, and also could only lose 20 shillings per day. If they could not ransom themselves (which probably implies paying the same fine of 100 shillings as the knights and the clergy), the punishment for disobeying the rule was severe. Soldiers were to be whipped naked for three days, while the mariners were to be plunged in the sea “after the usage of sailors” in the morning of three consecutive days, which seems to imply

³⁸ Boas, *Archaeology of the Military Orders*, 203.

³⁹ Sebbane, “Board Games: A Crusader Pastime,” 289.

⁴⁰ Boas, *Archaeology of the Military Orders*, 203.

⁴¹ Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, 198–201; Joinville, *The Life of Saint Louis*, 265. For a discussion of this episode, see Jacques Le Goff, *Saint Louis*, trans. Gareth E. Gollrad (Notre Dame, 2008 [1996]), 391. In 1254, on his return to France, Louis enacted a ban on chess, dice and backgammon for all of his subjects, but “it does not seem to have been very effective”: Eales, “The Game of Chess,” 29. See also Murray, *A History of Chess*, 410.

keelhauling. The agreement specified, however, that the kings “were to play at their good pleasure.”⁴²

In the late twelfth century, 20 shillings was a significant sum, normally enough to supply several people with grain to last them a year.⁴³ This could mean one of two things. It is possible that the restrictions were aimed at the better off among the crusaders, and soldiers and sailors were included for good measure. It is also possible that gambling among soldiers and sailors got completely out of hand, with crusaders indebting themselves beyond reason.

Roger of Howden does not explain the logic behind these regulations. However, immediately after his discussion on gambling, he relates that Philip and Richard also promulgated rules regarding debts. Crusaders enjoyed the privilege of not having to repay the debts incurred before the expedition till after its completion. The new rules specified that this privilege did not apply to any debts incurred during the crusade. One suspects that some soldiers tried to get out of repaying their gambling debts by making recourse to their special status.⁴⁴

Roger of Howden’s account implies that a “proper” way to gamble meant not suffering a larger loss than one could afford. The kings could gamble as much as they wanted, since, at least in theory, no stakes were too high for them. They did not play for material gain, but only for entertainment. While Louis IX was at Acre, Charles of Anjou once again entertained himself by gambling. This time, he “indulged at playing at dice” with his brother Alphonse of Poitiers. Joinville represents Alphonse as a “proper” gambler who did not care about profit. Whether Alphonse won or lost, he was such “a good-mannered player” that the result was the same: he ended up giving away money to his followers.⁴⁵ As Richard Eales convincingly remarked, the activity in which Alphonse engaged was not, properly speaking, gambling, but “a disguised form of patronage and largesse.”⁴⁶

In conclusion, crusading sources tend to represent gambling as a highly problematic activity. They depict love of gambling as symptomatic of serious

⁴² Roger of Hoveden, *Chronica*, 3:59; *The Annals of Roger de Hoveden*, 2/1:162.

⁴³ The calculations are as follows: in ca. 1300, Londoners consumed 1.65 quarters of grain per caput. This includes grain transformed into food and drink and also fodder necessary to transport the grain from the place of production to that of consumption. The estimates for inhabitants of other cities, such as Florence and Paris, are of the same order of magnitude: Bruce Campbell et al., *A Medieval Capital and its Grain Supply: Agrarian Production and Distribution in the London Region c. 1300* (Cheltenham, 1993), 35. In 1209, the price of 1.65 quarters of grain – half wheat (the most expensive) and half oats (the least expensive) – was 2.6 shillings: Gregory Clark, “The Price History of English Agriculture, 1209–1914,” *Research in Economic History* 22 (2004): 41–123. Assuming that grain consumption did not change significantly between 1209 and ca. 1300, in the early thirteenth century 20 shillings would have been enough to provide nearly eight people with enough grain – the main source of calories during the period – for a year. Given that both prices of grain and grain consumption could and did fluctuate, it is, of course, impossible to calculate the purchasing power of 20 shillings on Sicily during the winter of 1190–91. However, it is safe to say that it was a substantial sum that few ordinary soldiers or sailors had at their disposal. I would like to thank Ben Dodds for the references.

⁴⁴ John Gillingham, *Richard I* (New Haven, 1999), 137.

⁴⁵ Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, 206–07; Joinville, *The Life of Saint Louis*, 268.

⁴⁶ Eales, “The Game of Chess,” 29.

character flaws. They argue that gambling implied other, even more sinful activities, “drunken debauches” and the like. They claim that gambling led to loss of alertness, which, in turn, could lead to defeat and even death. However, despite these warnings and despite some attempts to regulate gambling, crusaders continued to gamble. This is one thing that they had in common with their Muslim enemies. There are many reasons why both medieval men and women gambled, including a need of diversion and desire for easy gain. However, although crusading sources do not give any indication of this, both Christian and Muslim antagonists must have, at least occasionally, become aware of the metaphysical side of gambling and would have appreciated the comparison that a Muslim poet (possibly Avicenna) made between gambling and human destiny:

Fate is the player. We the counters are.
Heaven the dice, our earth the gaming board.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Quoted in Rosenthal, *Gambling in Islam*, 161.