

Report on the outcomes of a Short-Term Scientific Mission¹

Action number: CA22145

Grantee name: Branislav Kovár

Details of the STSM

Title: Game boards from the Roman Period to the Middle Ages in Central Europe – heuristics, analysis, and synthesis

Description of the work carried out during the STSM

Description of the activities carried out during the STSM. Any deviations from the initial working plan shall also be described in this section.

My project at the University of Reading focused on researching archaeological finds of board games from Central Europe, dating from the Iron Age through the Middle Ages. During my stay, I systematically collected data on finds of games and game equipment, primarily in the libraries of the University of Reading, while also making limited use of the library collections at the University of Oxford. The University of Reading also provided me with access to several specialised online databases and electronic resources that are not commonly available in my home country. This allowed me to work with new scholarly literature, current scientific studies, and publications, which significantly expanded the information base for my research and enabled me to better interpret individual archaeological finds.

Through regular consultations with my colleagues, Dr Thomas Daniaux, Dr Tim Penn, and Dr Summer Courts, I expanded and refined my database of historical game finds from Central Europe. Discussions with experts helped me refine the classification of individual objects, verify interpretations of selected finds, and identify new parallels in foreign sources. My colleagues also drew my attention to additional relevant scholarly literature and research projects, which I subsequently studied in detail and applied to my own research (thanks to the library and the university's online resources).

Another significant benefit of the stay was the opportunity to compare finds from Central Europe with similar finds from Great Britain, Italy, and Spain. Thanks to my collaboration with Tim Penn, Summer

¹ This report is submitted by the grantee to the Action MC for approval and for claiming payment of the awarded grant. The Grant Awarding Coordinator coordinates the evaluation of this report on behalf of the Action MC and instructs the Grant Holder Manager to verify the grant documents compliance and proceed with the payment.

Courts, and Ilaria Truzzi, I gained valuable insights into regional differences, chronology, and the cultural contexts of the development of board games in various parts of Europe. Comparing foreign finds allowed me to better situate the Central European material within a broader European context and to identify both common features and specific characteristics of individual regions. I presented the results of my research as part of the Ludic Seminar Series

During our stay, we also collaborated on preparing two scholarly articles on historical games, specifically the sites of Iža (Slovakia) and Trogir (Croatia). In our analysis of the Iža site, we identified several gaming boards and other gaming-related objects, which expand our understanding of the Roman army's leisure activities on the Danube frontier. We also discussed the methodology for documenting and interpreting these finds, as well as the possibilities for publishing them in the international academic community.

In addition, we (together with T. Penn and S. Courts) have completed an article on the findings from the Qusur site in Kuwait, a medieval site on Failaka Island.

I also took advantage of my stay to visit important archaeological sites and museums housing significant finds of historical games. Among the most important was a visit to the British Museum, where I saw the well-known collection of game pieces from Welwyn Garden City, as well as the famous Lewis Chessmen. Direct exposure to these artefacts provided me with valuable insights into their craftsmanship, materials, and potential for public presentation—insights that I could not have gained solely from publications.

Another part of my stay involved popularising research on historical board games through paper models. In the past, I have successfully used a model of the Royal Game of Ur in outreach activities focused on archaeology and the history of games. During my stay in Reading, I created new paper models.

Description of the STSM main achievements and planned follow-up activities

Description and assessment of whether the STSM achieved its planned goals and expected outcomes, including specific contribution to Action objective and deliverables, or publications resulting from the STSM. Agreed plans for future follow-up collaborations shall also be described in this section.

As part of this project, I set out to achieve several goals:

To complete a database of games from Central Europe and utilise literature. During my research at the University of Reading library (and partly at the University of Oxford), I found many new sources for my database of board game finds. At the same time, I discovered new literature that expanded my knowledge and helped me with my methodology. The insights I gained allowed me to better place individual finds within a broader historical and cultural context.

Consultations and scholarly discussions. The University of Reading is home to several experts with whom I consulted during my stay on issues related to the study of historical games (Summer Courts, Tim Penn, Thomas Daniaux, and Ilaria Truzzi). Discussions with these colleagues provided me with new

perspectives on interpreting archaeological finds and allowed me to compare various methodological approaches used in the study of games in archaeology.

Work on publishing and analysing finds from Central Europe. Together with Summer Courts and Tim Penn, we completed and submitted an article on finds of board games and tokens likely associated with the game ludus latrunculorum from the Roman military camp at Iža (ancient Kelemantia), Slovakia, which will be published in a collection by Sidestone Press. At the same time, we have been working on a collection of 32 engraved gameboards from the vicinity of churches in Trogir, Croatia, based on our own research. The collection primarily includes three types of game boards – mills, chess/checkers, and alquerque. We will soon complete the article and submit it to the proposed Springer volume on games archaeology, which I am editing with B. Caré et al.

Popularisation. I am an active member of Working Group 2 within COST Action CA22145, but I have also participated in some events organised by Working Group 5; my main focus is on publicising well-known finds. Together with colleagues from the Institute of Archaeology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, among other outreach activities, we are also creating cut-out models of board games. During my stay in Reading, I created new paper models of the games Ludus latrunculorum and Senet, which will serve as educational tools for lectures, workshops, and outreach events for both specialists and the general public.

Future Plans. My activities at the University of Reading have laid the foundation for my future work. We will continue to analyse the finds from Trogir. We are also interested in other similar finds from the Dalmatia region of Croatia. My colleagues T. Penn, S. Courts, and I have agreed to seek funding for our research through scientific grants. We are aware of other board game finds from Dalmatia – for example, at the sites of Šibenik and Split – that we could record and analyse.

Together with the aforementioned colleagues, we will attempt to analyse other important finds from the Roman game Ludus latrunculorum at the Austrian site of Carnuntum and compare them with our finds from Iža. The goal will be to create a broader comparative study of this game.

I will present the information and results I obtained during my stay at the University of Reading at the European Archaeological Congress in Athens and at a conference on games archaeology in the Carpathian Basin in Alba Iulia, Romania. I would also like to present them at events of COST Action CA22145.

Thanks to the results of the STSM program, I became a long-term research associate in the Department of Classics at the University of Reading, enabling our collaboration to continue successfully.