Origin of 
“het SLABBERJAN-SPEL”

“Sta voor de vogel
gen geen spel
kent dit bevel
dan slabberjan
dit Walchers bovenspelig bezig zijn
is meer dan een herinnering
gen étalage-woord van het verleden kap af!
Koer de ruiter te paard
één hand en één oog
is niet mismaakt
als je voor de vogel staat
de herberg gaan we voorbij
en het poesje krabbelt alles terug
voor mij”

Editor note: With assistance from Fred Horn and a few online translators, this is a very loose interpretation of this poem!

Both sources indicate the game was introduced in Zeeland in the fourth quarter of the 18th century. The name of the game can well be traced to the family name “Slabber.” Families with that surname were still living in Westkapelle. On the other hand, “Slabber” also means “someone with a big mouth or a talkative person” in the Zeeuw language.

The game of “Gnav,” already known by 1770, was not only played in Denmark but also in Norway. “Gnav” came to Denmark and Norway around 1600 as a derivate of “Das Vogelspiel,” a game played in Germany with its descent in Italy where it was known as “Cambio.”

Pieces for the game of “Gnav” and cards used for “Cambio.”
Most striking is the use of playing pieces in “Gnav” as well as in “Slabberjan” wherein all the related games cards are used. In the beginning, “Gnav” was played with cards as well as with pieces. But in the 18th century the Danish king Christaan banned all card games. Thereafter, those interested in continuing to play the game, changed from ‘cards’ to ‘pieces.’ A rule-setting institution like the church did not object to playing the game that way. That is why the game has been played for such a long time inside family circles on Sundays as well as during holidays like Christmas, and often with pieces centuries old.

Card playing games were also banned in the army and on board ships. Soldiers and sailors changed over to using playing pieces which also led to the survival of the game.

Bearing in mind that “Slabberjan” has never been played with cards, it appears obvious that “Gnav” was the forerunner of “Slabberjan.” But this still does not explain how “Gnav” became “Slabberjan” and how it arrived on the island of Walcheren. According to Karels, one-time games shopkeeper Walraven stated that “Gnav” or the Italian “Cambio” were introduced into Holland by Italian mercenaries fighting for the Spanish king during the ‘Dutch War of Independence’ in the 17th century. However, Mr. Johan Franke, a historian from the village of Zoutelande, published an article about “Slabberjan” in the periodical Zeeland, from the Royal Zeeland Society of Science, in which he believes the time gap in this story is too long for that to have occurred. His view is that the game came from Norway to Zeeland, brought in by sailors or maid-servants.

For the longest time, “Slabberjan” could be bought as a manufactured game. However, in the 1990s, there was only one surviving shopkeeper in the town of Middelburg who sold “Slabberjan” commercially. Though you cannot buy the game commercially anymore, you can do what a lot of families in Zeeland did: Make one yourself!

In the past it was common to make game pieces from small wooden threadspools. The spools were sawn in two, resulting in two game pieces. On the outside surfaces of the spool a picture or a number was painted. A pouch could be made from an old towel and the game was ready to play. You could use a broomstick for making the game pieces as well. First, saw the broomstick into segments of 2 centimeters, and then saw each of these slices in half. This would result in two game pieces each having a flat side. Paint the pictures and numbers on this flat side and your game is finished.

Sometimes they say in Zeeland:

“There are as many conflicting rules and ways to play on the island as there are families.”

**RULES for the game “Slabberjan”**

The method of play for “Slabberjan” and the value of the different pieces along with their effect on the progress of the game are not standardized. This means that before starting a game, all players must agree on the rules to use. This preface seems to work well when playing with a large group.

“Slabberjan” consists of 42 playing pieces and a sack. The game can be played with 2 to 42 players, but is most fun when at least 5 to 20 players participate.

Each player starts with 3 or 4 cents (in his pocket) depending on the amount of players and the available time. The players sit next to each other around a table. To determine who starts the game, all game pieces are put into the sack and each player draws one piece. The player with the highest valued piece starts the game. If two players both pick the same valued piece, they draw again from the sack until one of them has a higher valued piece. This player starts the game and places all of the pieces back into the sack.

There are two equal sets of 21 pieces, each set consisting of four low-valued picture-pieces; 13 numeral-pieces; and four high-valued picture-pieces, the so-called Matador.

Ranking goes from the lowest-valued piece (fool) to highest-valued (cut short):

- "Jan Rit" (fool)
- "Smool" (scary face)
- "Pispot" (chamber pot)
- "Blind" (flour sack)
- "0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12" up to the Matador (picture-pieces):
  - "Herberg" (inn)
  - "Poesje" (pussycat)
  - "Vogel" (bird)
  - "Kap-af" (cut short)
This act of "swapping" is required for players who do not hold a Matador in their hand. Only when a player possesses a Matador can he act as follows:

**Herberg:** The player who owns this piece says: "Herberg voorbij" (go by the inn) or "Drink een borrel en ga voorbij" (have a drink and pass by). The player to his right now passes the player with "Herberg" and "swaps" his piece with the next player.

**Poesje:** The owner of this piece starts to "Mauw" (Meow) and then says: "Poesje krabt alles terug" (pussycat scratches all in reverse). This means that all former "swaps" in this round are converted. All players on the right-hand side of the owner of "Poesje" get their original piece returned to them. The player on the left-hand side continues to "swap" his piece with his left neighbor according to the rules. Only when the dealer picks "Poesje" out of the sack, after putting his 'too-low-valued' piece away, everything is converted including the dealer's turn. In this case the sack acts like an additional player.

**Vogel:** This player says: "Sta voor den vogel" (Stand still in front of the bird), and the round ends immediately. The player who started this round by dealing is still allowed to change his piece with one from the sack.

**Kap-af:** The owner slams his fist on the table and cries: "Kap af!" (Cut short!). The player who tried to "swap" with "Kap-af" pays a fine of 1 cent into the "Pot" (pool). The round ends immediately and the dealer is not allowed to change his piece with another one out of the sack.

Without "Vogel" or "Kap-af," a round normally ends when the dealer has "swapped" his piece and eventually takes one out of the sack. Only when he draws "Poesje" from the sack, the round continues following the regular rules. When he picks one of the other Matadores pieces, he is only lucky, the round still ends.

The last phase of a round is called: "Blikken." All players show the value of their pieces. The player with the lowest-valued piece has to pay a penalty of 1 cent into the "Pot." In the case his piece is the "Jan Rit," the player with the next lowest valued piece has to pay the penalty of 1 cent as well. If "Jan Rit" appears twice in a round, both the owners have to pay the penalty of 1 cent into the "Pot" as well as the two players who own the next two lower valued pieces.

A round is declared void when two players in the possession of "Jan Rit" try to "swap." In that case both show their piece and say loudly: "Rit over Rit, spel te niete!" (Ride over ride, game frozen!) The dealer of this round takes all of the pieces, puts them back into the sack, and starts all over again.

A player who loses his last cent becomes "op z'n sloffen" (on slippers). He remains in the game if there is more than one player with money at the start of a new round. Only when he is forced again to pay his next penalty of 1 cent is he out, and the game continues without him. The winner is the only player who survives with money (in his pocket). The winner claims all the money in the "Pot."

The above rules are the most common associated with the game "Slabberjan." A lot of variations of these rules exist, so it is best to check the rules, as stated earlier, before starting the game.