

# Tafel games

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(Redirected from Tablut)

**Tafel games** are a family of ancient Germanic and Celtic board games played on a checkered or latticed board with two teams of uneven strength. Versions of Tafel were played across much of Northern Europe from at least 400 CE until it was supplanted by

Chess in the 12th century.<sup>[1]</sup> Tafel games were one of the three great international board-games of the Middle Ages, the others being Backgammon and Chess. It has been suggested that Tafel is derived from the Roman game *Ludus latruncularum*, but that game was played with equal pieces on both sides. It is more likely that Tafel is an invention of early Scandinavia. In the Early Middle Ages it was considered the province of gods, kings, and champions, first played by the god Odin. Early Scandinavian king-pieces often resemble the god Thor.

The term *tafel* (Old Norse: "table, board") (IPA: [ˈtɑp̚l̥]) is believed to have referred to any game board<sup>[2]</sup>. *Hnefatafel* became the preferred term for the game in Scandinavia by the end of the Viking Age, to distinguish it from other board-games, such as *Skakatafel* (Chess) and *Halatafel* (Fox games), as these became known.<sup>[3]</sup> Tafel came to be called *Hnefatafel*, possibly "the board-game of the fist", from *hnefi* ("fist") + *tafel*,<sup>[4]</sup> "fist" referring to the central king-piece. This etymology is doubted, but *hnefi* certainly referred to the king-piece,<sup>[5]</sup> and several sources refer to *Hnefatafel* as "King's table". In Anglo-Saxon England, the term *tæfel* also referred to many board-games. It is not known if the Anglo-Saxons had a specific name for the game or if they just referred to it as "tæfel" in the way that modern people might refer to "cards". In Dutch, "tafel" means "table", in German "Tafel" has related meanings as well.

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## Tafel and Variants

**Tafel** spread everywhere the Vikings travelled, including England, Wales, Ireland, Scotland, and Brittany. The size of the board and the number of pieces varied from place to place. All games involve a distinctive 2:1 ratio of pieces, with one side having a king-piece that starts in the centre. The king attempts to escape to the corners while the other side attempts to



Illustration from the Ockelbo Runestone, Sweden.



Hnefatafel (from www.leikmot.net)

capture him.

**Hnefatafl** is the name of the game in Scandinavia, frequently referred to in the Sagas. Vikings considered skill at hnefatafl to be a valuable attribute, and in one story one player kills the other due to a disagreement over the game. The rules of the game were never recorded, and only playing pieces and fragmentary boards are extant, so it is not known for sure how the game was played. It was played on an 11x11 board.

**Alea evangelii**, which means "the board-game of the gospel," was described, with a drawing, in the twelfth-century Corpus Christ College manuscript 122, from Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>[6]</sup> It is played on the intersections of a 19x19 board. The manuscript describes the layout of the board as a religious allegory, but it is clear that this was a game based on tafl, perhaps with an influence from chess. It is likely that the game was described as a religious exercise and rarely actually played. The modern day rules of Alea evangelii can be found on the Alea evangelii (game) page.

**Tawlbwrdd** was played in Wales. It is described as being played with 8 pieces on the king's side and 16 on the attacker's side. Robert ap Ifan documented it with a drawing in a manuscript dated 1587. His version was played on an 11x11 board with 12 pieces on the king's side and 24 on the opponent's side. His passage states:

The above tawlbwrdd should be played with a king in the centre and twelve men in the places next to him, and twenty-four men seek to capture him. These are placed, six in the centre of each side of the board and in the six central positions. And two move the men in the game, and if one [piece] belonging to the king comes between the attackers, he is dead and is thrown out of the game, and the same if one of the attackers comes between two of the king's men in the same manner. And if the king himself comes between two of the attackers, and if you say 'Watch your king' before he moves to that space, and he is unable to escape, you capture him. If the other says 'I am your liegeman' and goes between two, there is no harm. If the king can go along the [illegible] line, that side wins the game. <sup>[7]</sup>

**Brandub** (Modern Irish: *Bran dubh*) is the Irish form of tafl. We know from two poems that it was played with five men against eight, and that one of the five was a "Brannán", or chief. A number of 7x7 boards have been found, the most famous being the elaborate wooden Ballinderry board. The board has holes for pegged pieces, allowing the game to be played while moving, for instance on board a ship. The name brandub means "raven-black".

**Tablut**, from Lapland, is the best documented version. In 1732, Carolus Linnaeus recorded the rules and a drawing of the board in his journal while travelling through the area. He did not speak the language and described the game only from observing the players. His description, which is in Latin, is only partial. The game is played on 9x9 squares; Linnaeus observed the players playing on embroidered reindeer hide. In his diary, *Lachesis Lapponica*, Linnaeus referred to the light (defending) pieces as "Swedes" and the dark (attacking) pieces as "Muscovites".<sup>[8]</sup> What seems to be the same game was still being played in the late nineteenth century, as described in P.A. Lindholm's *Hos Lappbönder* (1884).

## Other Games

**Halatafl** is a different game, dating from at least the 14th century. It is still known and played in Europe, see Fox games.

**Fidchell** (Modern Irish: *ficheall*) was played in Ireland. The Welsh equivalent was gwyddbwyll and the Breton equivalent gwezboell. All terms mean "wood-sense". This popular medieval game was played with equal forces on each side and thus is not related to tafl. It may be the medieval descendent of the Roman game *latrunculi* or *ludus latrunculorum*.

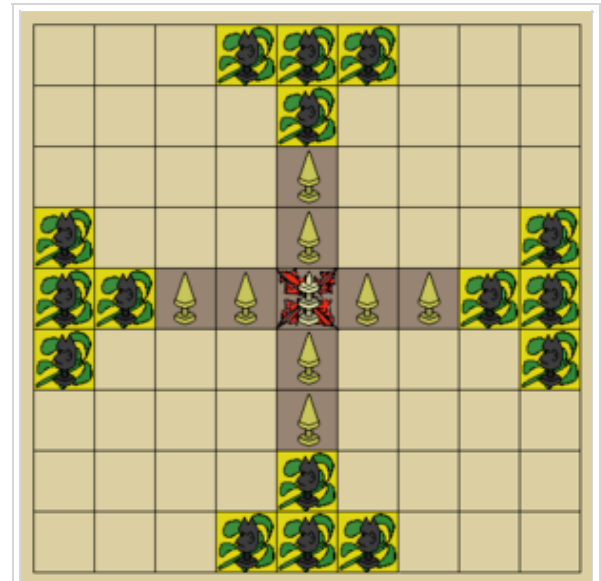
**Skaktafl** is the Old Norse name for Chess.

## Reconstruction

As mentioned above, no complete, unambiguous descriptions of the rules of a Tafl game exist. The best description we have

from history is that given by Carolus Linnaeus of the game **Tablut** in the 1732 diary of his travels, *Lachesis Lapponica*. The following rules are based on the 1811 translation of *Lachesis Lapponica* into English by James Edward Smith.<sup>[9]</sup>

- The game is played on a 9×9 board. Initial set-up is as shown in the diagram.
- The king starts on the central square or castle, called the *konakis*, which no other piece may ever occupy.
- The eight defenders, called *Swedes*, start on the eight squares adjoining the *konakis*, in the form of a cross.
- The sixteen attackers, called *Muscovites*, start in groups of four at the center of each edge of the board. (*In Linnaeus' notes, these squares were embroidered to signify them as the domain of the Muscovites.*)
- All remaining squares (neutral zone) may be occupied by any piece during the game.
- Any piece may move any number of vacant spaces in any straight line [ $\leftarrow$  $\rightarrow$  $\uparrow$  $\downarrow$ ], but not diagonally. (*Compare to the rook in Chess.*)
- No piece may ever pass over another piece in its path.
- If the king should ever have an unimpeded path (through the neutral zone) to the edge of the board, unless he is immediately blocked by a *Muscovite*, he may escape and the game is over. (*This rule suggests that the king may not escape through the domain of the Muscovites.*)
- If the king should ever have a path of escape, he must call out "*raichi*"; if two paths of escape, then his escape is eminent and he must call out "*tuichu*". (*Compare this to "check" and "checkmate" in Chess.*)
- Any piece, save for the king, may be captured and removed from the board if it becomes surrounded on two opposite sides by enemies. (*This is known as custodial capture.*)
- If the king is surrounded on all four sides by enemies, he is taken prisoner. If he is surrounded on three sides, he may escape by the fourth.
- If the king is on a square adjoining the *konakis* and is surrounded on three sides by his enemies and the fourth by the *konakis*, he is captured. (*This rule suggests that once the king has left the konakis, he can never return.*)
- When the king is captured, the *Swedes* are conquered and the *Muscovites* victorious.



**Starting position:** Lighter "Swedes" start in center, while darker "Muscovites" start at the board's edges. Based on Linnaeus' sketches reproduced in Smith (1811).

Several problems of gameplay are left woefully ambiguous or completely untouched in Linnaeus' notes, and some translations are problematic.<sup>[10]</sup> For more information on reconstructing the rules of play, see this article (<http://hem.bredband.net/b512479/>) by Sten Helmfrid.

## Controversy

The above represent the rules of Tablut as described by Carolus Linnaeus' diary from 1732, but there may be other ways in which Hnefatafl and its derivatives are played by reconstructionists. Neil Peterson has researched into the historical sources and even carried out a scientific study (<http://www.treheima.ca/viking/tafl.htm>) suggesting that Linnaeus' special capture of the king is incorrect. The controversy surrounding Tablut largely stems from the widely reported imbalance of the game, as the rules strongly favor the king,<sup>[11]</sup> although there are several rule modifications that can produce more balanced play, and Schmittberger (1992) even reveals some workarounds to produce more balanced play without modifying the rules of gameplay.

One such solution is by bidding: Players take turns bidding on how many moves it will take them to win the game. The lowest bidder gets the king. Thus, one player may open with a bid of 15 turns, the other player may counter with a bid of 14 turns, and the first player, more confident in his ability to escape in 13 rounds than in his ability to contain for 14, may bid

13 and take the king's side. If that player does not escape within 13 turns, the other player wins.<sup>[12]</sup> Another workaround is to play a two-round match, in which players switch sides after the first round. If the king escapes both rounds, the winner is the player whose king escaped in the fewest turns.<sup>[13]</sup>

The description of Tawlbrydd by Robert ap Ifan (preceding Linnaeus' account by 145 years) states that the king could be captured by two men. Statistics from modern games played with four-man capture of the king show that white wins more often than black. However, it has not yet been demonstrated that balanced play results from rules allowing for a two-man capture of the king.

## See also

- Fox games (e.g. *Fox and geese*)
- Game of the Gods
- Peg solitaire
- Thud, a modern game inspired by Tafl games
- Zillions of Games, which includes an implementation of Tafl games in its demo version

## Citations

- ↑ Murray 1951, p.56.
- ↑ Murray 1951, p.56.
- ↑ Murray 1951, p.57.
- ↑ Zoëga 2004, "hnefa"/"-tafl"/"hnefi".
- ↑ Murray 1951, p.60.
- ↑ Murray 1951, p. 61
- ↑ Ifan 1587, p.4, cited in Murray 1951.
- ↑ Schmittberger 1992, p.23.
- ↑ Smith 1811, pp.55-58.
- ↑ Helmfrid 2005, p.4.
- ↑ Schmittberger 1992, p.24.
- ↑ Schmittberger 1992, p.25.
- ↑ Schmittberger 1992, p.28.

## References

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- Zoëga, G. T. (2004). *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, republication of work originally published by Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1910.

## External links

- Boardspace.net (<http://www.boardspace.net/>) play Tablut online against human or robot opponents
- BBC article (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A856451>) on Hnefatafl
- Tafel (<http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/games.shtml>) by the Viking Answer Lady
- Tafel: An Obsession (<http://tafl.snigfarp.karoo.net/tafl/home.html>) - play the game online with all variations
- Hnefatafl - the Strategic Board Game of the Vikings (<http://hem.bredband.net/b512479/>) - An overview of rules and variations of the game by Sten Helmfrid
- Hnefatafl - King's Table (<http://www.leikmot.net/>)
- Hnefatafl (<http://www.zillions-of-games.com/cgi-bin/zilligames/submissions.cgi/41246?do=show;id=471>) - an implementation for the Zillions of Games platform
- BrainKing's Tablut page (<http://brainking.com/en/GameRules?tp=19>) - Offers a good explanation of the rules and allows you to play the game.
- Viking Siege (<http://www.user.dccnet.com/cedwards/>) - A computerized Tafel game (free download) with 7x7, 11x11, and 13x13 boards.
- Early Irish Board Games (<http://www.unicorngarden.com/eigse/eigse01.htm>) - an interesting article that covers brandub, among other games.
- Hnefatafl. The Viking Game. (<http://www.gamecabinet.com/history/Hnef.html>) Explanation of variations and the rules.
- Tablut (Hnefatafl) (<http://hem.passagen.se/melki9/tablut.htm>) A program that uses the rules found in research.
- Tablut Online. ([http://www.download-free-games.com/board\\_game\\_download/tablut\\_online.htm](http://www.download-free-games.com/board_game_download/tablut_online.htm)) A program with a free trial version.
- Rules of Tablut. (<http://www.stmoroky.com/games/tablut/tabrules.htm>) Try playing for free using the Java applet.
- Tafel games ([http://www.dmoz.org/Games/Board\\_Games/Abstract/Unequal\\_Forces/Tafel/](http://www.dmoz.org/Games/Board_Games/Abstract/Unequal_Forces/Tafel/)) at the Open Directory Project

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