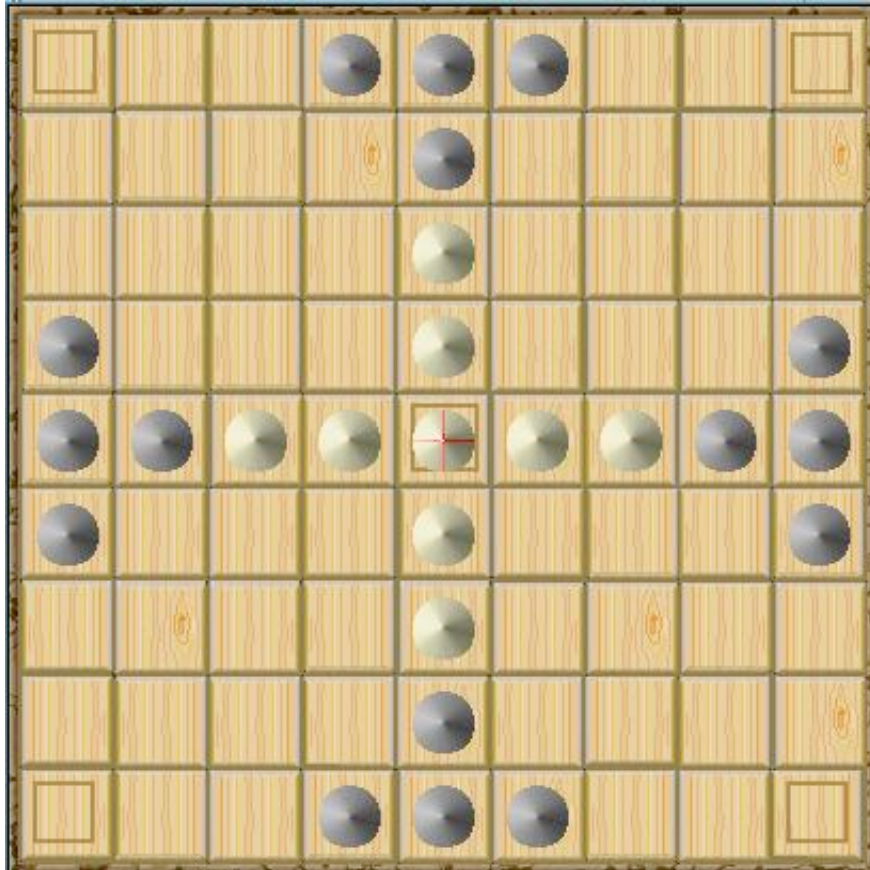


# Tablut

the game of the Viking sagas



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In *Tablut* (*Hnefatafl*) the Black side is laying siege to the kingdom of the White side. The object for the White side is to move his King ("Hnefi") to one of the corner squares, in which case he has successfully escaped. The object for the Black side is to capture the White King. Black makes the first move.

All pieces move like a Rook in chess, that is, any number of squares horizontally or vertically. No pieces, except the King, may land on the corner squares or the centre square. The centre square is the King's throne or "Konakis".

Tablut employs orthogonal interception-capture. When an enemy piece is surrounded on two opposite sides, the piece is captured. The corner and centre squares also act like friendly pieces, so if an enemy piece is sandwiched between a friendly piece and these special squares, this also results in capture. Capture is not mandatory.

The same capture rules applies also to the King, except when it is positioned on the centre square, when it must be surrounded on all four sides. If the King is positioned on any of the four squares adjacent to the centre, it must be surrounded on three sides, plus the centre square, which then functions as a capture-square.

Tablut boards and pieces are often found in Viking graves. Pieces are typically made of bone, glass, or amber. The game had a rich history in Viking tales. In one such story King Knut and Jarl Ulf were playing, and Knut made a mistake allowing Ulf to capture a piece. Knut requested that he be allowed to take back his move. Ulf refused, toppling the board, and an argument ensued that ended when Ulf was killed.

The Swedish botanist Carolus Linnæus, the inventor of the system for classifying plants and animals we still use today, wrote about this game in his diary in 1732. He discovered it during his travels in Lapland, where the game had survived and was still played among the Lapps. The side with the King represented the Swedes, while the other side represented Moscovites.

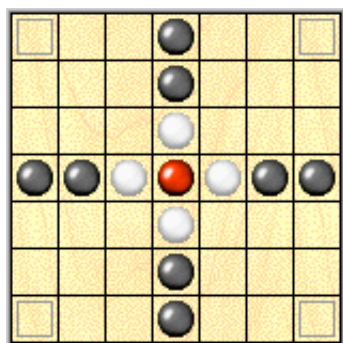
Watch out whenever a piece is positioned orthogonally adjacent to an opponent's, as it's liable to get captured. Exchanging pieces early in the game would generally benefit White rather than Black, because White needs open space to escape with his King. Black should try to keep the position crowded. Both sides should look out for King moves that allow the King two different paths to the rim, since it will be impossible to block both directions at the same time.

Four variants have been implemented: *Tablut* (9x9), *Brandubh*

(7x7), Large Hnefatafl (13x13), and Alea Evangelii (19x19). *Tablut* (above image) seems to be a well-balanced game. It's a tough nut to crack, although Black should probably win in the end. In *Brandubh* (below) White can sometimes achieve a rapid win, but Black's chances seem slightly better. Note that White should not give up if he loses all his pieces because he can often acquire a draw by repetition, by repeatedly threatening to go to a corner square.

Tablut and Large Hnefatafl derive from Scandinavia and are perhaps more original than Brandubh and Alea Evangelii (The Evangelic Game), which were played on the British islands. The rules of Alea Evangelii only differ in that White starts the game. This implementation follows the rules researched by the Historical Museum, Stockholm, and it shows what a sophisticated game Tablut is. It was immensely popular during the Viking era. It is clearly the king of hunt-games.

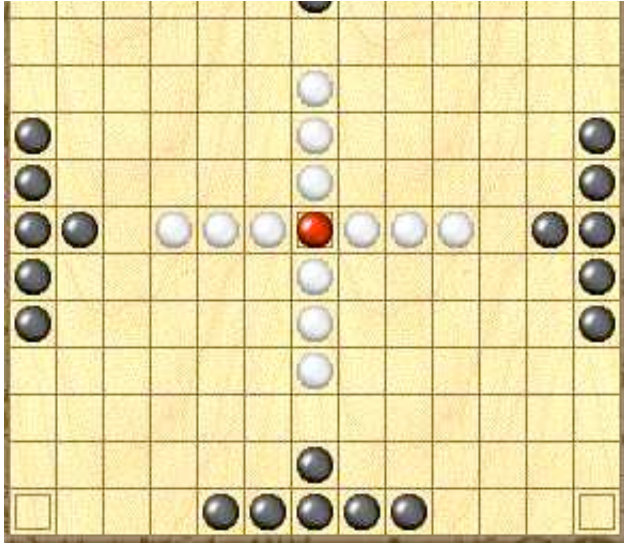
There are two other versions of the game, with similar rules, namely the British *gwyddbwyll* and the Irish *fidhchell*, that figure in many stories in the Celtic tradition. The corner squares were regarded as the four Otherworldly cities to which the Tuatha de Danaan arrive. It was a godlike idealized people around which many heroic stories revolve. On the gaming board, which was also the land, the center is regarded as sacred and called Tara, the seat of High Kings. As the mystical fifth dimension it represented the Otherworld itself, which was always proximate, and overlying reality (Cf. Matthew, C., *The Celtic Tradition*, pp.9-10).



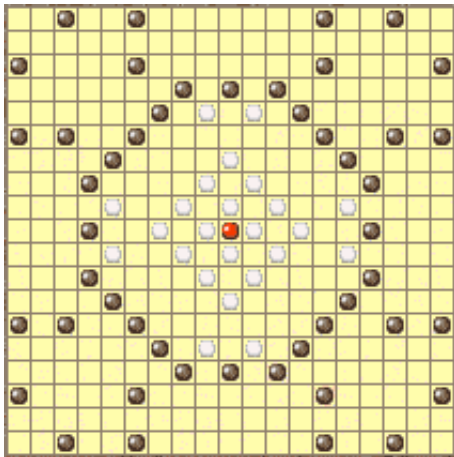
*Brandubh* ("black raven") is Irish and is a quite sophisticated game. It is much more complicated than one would expect.



*Large Hnefatafl* derives from Scandinavia. A game of this size would probably call



for training from early age. It appears that Viking boys trained "swimming and playing tafl". Tafl is the oldest name for Hnefatafl.



*Alea Evangelii* ("The Evangelical game") derives from 10th century England. Christian interpreters viewed it as an allegory of the Evangelists. The *primarius vir* (the king) symbolized the unity of the Trinity. In reality it was played on the intersections of an 18x18 board, which makes 19x19 positions (actually, a Go board). Computer tests show that it is well-balanced, if played according to above rules. Its level of complexity rivals that of Go.

You can download my free Tablut program [here](#) (updated 2006-08-05), but you must own the software [Zillions of Games](#) to be able to run it.

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