

HNEFATAFL – THE VIKINGS’ CHESS

Rules and Historical Source Documents

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Game Rules and Primary Source Documents

“What are these maidens
who fight their lord;
the darker ones defend all day,
the fairer ones attack?”
King Heidrek, solve the riddle.

“It is Hnefatafl; the dark pieces defend the king,
and the white ones attack.”

— Hervarar Saga ok Heiðreks

Photo: Copenhagen Hnefatafl 11×11

In modern reconstructions, the king’s side is usually light-colored, while the dark side attacks from all four directions. Apparently this feels more natural to us. However, judging from the text of the saga, the Vikings may have played the opposite way: the light pieces attacked while the dark pieces defended the king.

This article examines the most popular variants of Hnefatafl: the Historical versions 9×9 and 11×11, as well as Copenhagen Hnefatafl 11×11. Illustrations are taken from the mobile application “Hnefatafl” by Philippe Schober and from the website of the International Tafl Federation.

Hnefatafl differs from most other board games primarily because the two sides have completely different objectives. The white side is placed in the center and attacked from all directions by the black side — or, depending on one’s perspective, the whites attack the black camps from the center.

There are a great many Tafl variants. The mobile app “Hnefatafl” by Philippe Schober contains around thirty variants, and the International Tafl Federation website contains even more. However, many of these variants do not function well in practice because they are unbalanced and unsuitable for serious play.

Such an abundance of variants creates confusion and often discourages new players rather than attracting them, because it is unclear which version is worth learning. Furthermore, standardization is necessary for tournaments and player ratings.

For this reason, only a few tested and generally accepted variants are used for the World Championship held annually on the Federation website. These are the versions worth focusing on.

The World Championship uses the following versions:

1. Copenhagen Hnefatafl 11×11 (modern version proposed in 2012 by Aage Nielsen of Denmark, head of the Tafl Federation).
2. Historical Hnefatafl:
 - Round 1: Saami Tablut 9×9
 - Round 2: Lewis Cross 11×11
3. Sea Tafl:
 - Round 1: 11×11
 - Round 2: 13×13

In Sea Tafl, an unarmed Viking cargo ship replaces the king and is protected by warships.

This article examines the first two variants. Sea Tafl will be described separately.

General Rules for All Variants

1. In every version of Hnefatafl, the King (Prince, Konung) is placed in the center on the throne, surrounded by his defenders.
2. Only the king may occupy the throne square.
3. The black side, usually twice as numerous, begins along the board edges and attacks or surrounds the king.
4. The goal of the black side is to capture the king.
5. All pieces move like rooks in chess: horizontally or vertically across any number of empty squares.
6. Enemy pieces are captured by sandwiching them between two allied pieces horizontally or vertically.

Capture Rules

A piece that voluntarily moves between two enemy pieces is not considered captured.

This rule raises some questions because the historical sources are unclear. On the one hand, the game mechanics suggest that a piece trapped between two enemies should be captured. On the other hand, capture appears to require an active move by the attackers.

The currently accepted interpretation is that such a move is legal and does not result in capture.

It is possible to capture up to three enemy pieces at once.

Captures may also be made “against the throne.” Black pieces may always be captured against the throne; white pieces may only be captured against the throne when the king is absent from it.

Capturing the King

In all Tafl variants:

- The king on the throne must be surrounded on four sides.
- On squares adjacent to the throne, the king is captured from three sides.

Differences Between Copenhagen and Historical Variants

The main differences are not board size, but the presence or absence of special corner squares and different balancing methods.

In Copenhagen Hnefatafl 11×11:

- The king wins by reaching one of the four corner squares.
- The king is captured only by being surrounded on four sides.

In Historical variants:

- The king wins by reaching any edge square.
- The king is captured from two sides on ordinary squares, except near the throne where special rules apply.

In Copenhagen Hnefatafl the king behaves almost like a tank, smashing through enemy formations. In Historical versions the king is more vulnerable but has many more escape routes.

First Move

Perfect balance like chess is impossible because the sides are asymmetrical and have different goals.

In Copenhagen Hnefatafl, white is considered slightly stronger, so black moves first.

In Historical variants, black is considered stronger, so white moves first.

Special Corner Capture Rule in Copenhagen Hnefatafl

Because the corners are special squares usable only by the king, captures “against the corner” are allowed. Without this rule, pieces beside a corner could not be captured.

Historical versions do not use this rule because their corners are ordinary squares.

Special Copenhagen Rules

1. Exit Fort

Defenders may win by building a fortress if:

- the king has access to the board edge,
- the king has at least one legal move within the fortress,
- and the attackers cannot break in.

2. Shield Wall

A row of two or more taflmen along the edge may be captured together if enemy pieces occupy both ends of the row. A corner square may substitute for one of the attackers. The king may participate in the capture.

These rules are not used in Historical variants.

Strategy

In general, the white side aims to occupy squares behind black lines, especially near the corners in Copenhagen play. The king should then move toward these advanced defenders while exchanges open space.

Black attempts to prevent white penetration by sealing open lines and maintaining a solid formation that gradually compresses white's space.

Exchanges and captures are only means to an end. Black wants to deprive white of material and mobility; white wants to clear space for the king.

Where to Play

Tafl may be played:

- in the “Hnefatafl” mobile application by Philippe Schober,
- or on the website of the International Tafl Federation.

The Federation constantly tests variants and evaluates balance through tournament games.

The app accurately represents Copenhagen Hnefatafl 11×11. Historical variants differ slightly because Federation rules evolved over time.

“Historical Tablut 9×9” in the app mostly corresponds to “Saami Tablut 9×9” on the Federation site, except for the first move rule.

“Simple Tafl 11×11” in the app mostly corresponds to “Lewis Cross 11×11,” though it lacks the throne square.

For beginners, these differences are minor.

Do not use the app variant “Linnaeus Tablut 9×9,” because it contains the incorrect rule that the king may not return to the throne.

Lewis Cross 11×11

Since 2023, the Federation has used the historical variant “Lewis Cross 11×11” for the second round of the World Championship.

Rules:

- The king escapes by reaching any edge square.
- The king is captured from two sides except on and near the throne.

This is, in my opinion, the best Tafl variant: sharp, dynamic, balanced, and highly tactical.

Appendix: Historical Source Documents

Carl Linnaeus' Diary, 1732

In 1732, Swedish scientist Carl von Linnaeus observed the Saami playing “Tablut” during his Lapland expedition and recorded the rules.

Main points:

- The king sits on the throne in the center.
- The game uses a 9×9 board.
- Pieces move like chess rooks.
- The king wins by reaching the edge.
- Black wins by capturing the king.
- Captures are made by surrounding pieces on two sides.

Linnaeus also preserved detailed rule examples in Latin.

Robert ap Ifan Manuscript, 1587

The National Library of Wales preserves manuscript Peniarth 158 from 1587, containing a sketch of an 11×11 Tafl board and rules for Tawlbwrdd.

The manuscript describes:

- a king in the center,
- twelve defenders,
- twenty-four attackers,
- and captures by enclosure.

Frank Lewis later studied the manuscript and reconstructed starting positions.

The right-hand reconstruction proposed by Lewis is, in my opinion, one of the finest Tafl setups ever created. It offers excellent balance, rich variation, and sharp tactical play.

The app version “Simple Tafl” is based on this setup, though strangely the throne was removed.

On the Federation website, the more historical version with the throne included is called “Lewis Cross 11×11.”

Conclusion

We possess two independent historical sources describing essentially the same game:

- Linnaeus’ 9×9 Tablut,
- and Robert ap Ifan’s 11×11 Tawlbwrdd.

Both describe:

- a king in the center,
- defenders outnumbered two to one,
- and captures by enclosure from two sides.

The board sizes differ, likely due to regional tradition.

Modern Tafl reconstructions are therefore based on substantial historical evidence.

Dmitry Tsvilenev, 2024