

DABLO – A SÁMI GAME

by Peter Michaelsen

Dablo is a game of the Sámit from Lappland – those we previously called “Lapps” – nomadic reindeer herders of northern Scandinavia and the Kola peninsula. The word ‘dablo’ is probably an archaic loan from Scandinavian languages. Like the related northern Germanic ‘tafl’, ‘dablo’ is ultimately derived from the Latin ‘tabula’.

All these words had the wider meaning: “board game”, and it seems that ‘dablo’ (also pronounced ‘tablo’, ‘tablu’ and ‘dabla’) was used of at least three types of board games: 1) the old Viking game ‘hnefatafl’, described in earlier issues of this magazine, 2) hunt games, or asymmetric blockade games with jump capture – a well-known example of this type is named ‘fox-and-geese’ in English, 3) war games with jump capture, a variant of which was known in Medieval Spain as ‘alquerque de doze’. ‘Alquerque’ is often used as a generic name of this type of games.

The game referred to as ‘hnefatafl’ in medieval Icelandic literature, survived among the Sámit long after it had disappeared elsewhere. It was first described by a non-Sámi observer in 1732 when Carl von Linné (Linnaeus) recorded the rules of play in his diary while on a botanical excursion in Swedish Lappland. Linné described this game as ‘tablut’, a verbal form meaning “to play tablu”.

The earliest short notes about Sámi hunt games derive likewise from the 18th century (Högström 1747, p.158; Leem 1767, p.389). These games were still played in the early 20th century, but it seems that nobody recorded their rules. In the 18th century the Sámit in Finnmark, northern Norway, used a cross-shaped board, one fox and 13 geese for their game (Leem), while the Lule Sámit in Sweden in the early 20th century used game boards with 5x5 or 9x5 points for their ‘rävtablo’ or ‘vargtablo’ (fox or wolf tablo, Manker 1947, p.226,

Manker 1963), played with one fox or two wolves against people or reindeer. In Frostviken, northern Jämtland, Sweden, a board with 41 points was used for both a war game and for a hunt game. In the latter case one of the kings served as a fox (Wiklund 1892).

It is generally assumed that Linné’s account from 1732 is the latest description of a surviving hnefatafl game. In 1884, more than 150 years after Linné’s journey, a book about Sámi legends, folklore and traditions was published in Stockholm. In this book (Lindholm 1884, p.82) it is mentioned, “it may happen that a few men sit down and play a sort of chess, where the pieces are called Russians and Swedes, and try to defeat each other. Here intense battles are fought, which easily can be observed on the players, who sometimes are so absorbed that they cannot see or hear anything else”. This passage could refer to the game described by Linné, but it could just as well refer to a war game, with jump capture, which was certainly played among the Sámit in the 19th century.

The most detailed account of the rules of this game was published in a 1921 article by Nils Keyland: “Dablot prejjesne och dablot duoljesne”.

‘Dablot duoljesne’ means ‘To play dablo on a fur’. In this game, mostly played by children and young people, the two players flick a small round stick with their fingers on a reindeer fur in order to make the opponent’s pieces fall over.

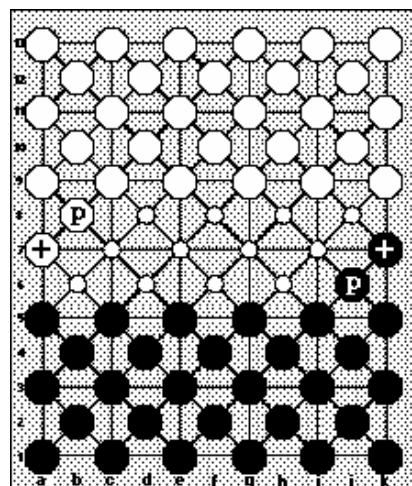
‘Dablot prejjesne’ means ‘To play dablo on a board’.

The board seen by Keyland in Frostviken was a fir-plank 20 inches long, 12 inches wide and one inch thick, the marked-out playing area being 12 inches by 10 inches and divided into 30 squares with their diagonals, creating 72 points. The contestants in this game are a tribe of nomadic Sámit and settled people farming the land.

The pieces were of carved wood. One player had 28 Sámit, painted yellow and standing about one inch high, with pointed tops. In addition he had a Sámi Prince, slightly larger than the soldiers and marked with two rings, and a Sámi King, larger still and

with three rings. The Sámi King and his son were uncoloured.

The other player had 28 Peasants an inch high, painted red and with two small points in the top. The larger Peasant Prince was distinguished by two bands and his father the Peasant King was larger still and was marked with three bands. The Peasant King and his son were coloured brown except for their tops and rings which were picked out in red.



The diagram above shows the opening position, with the Sámi Soldiers on rows 1-5, the Sámi prince on j6, and the Sámi King on k7. The Peasants are on rows 13-9, with the Peasant Prince on b8 and the Peasant King on a7.

Rules for Dablot Prejjesne

1. Every piece may move to the nearest unoccupied point, orthogonally or diagonally, forwards or backwards. A short leap may be made over an enemy piece to a vacant point beyond. The piece jumped over is removed from the board.

2. Players are not compelled to make a capture, nor to complete the maximum number of captures possible in one turn of play.

3. Peasant Soldiers and Sámi Soldiers are of equal power and may capture each other, but may not capture not one of the major pieces.

4. The Sámi Prince may capture the Peasant Prince, or vice versa; they can both capture minor pieces, but cannot attack the Sámi King or the Peasant King.

5. The Sámi King and the Peasant King can capture each other, and any other piece on the board. Their powers of movement, however, are the same as the other pieces – one vacant point in any direction, or a short leap over an enemy piece on to an empty point beyond.

6. The game ends when one player is defenceless and resigns.

7. If one player has only a major piece left, and the other has several minor pieces, the latter can win the game by surrounding the former and depriving him of the power to move. This is winning by immobilization.

8. If the players are left with only one piece each of equal power, either a Sámi Soldier and a Peasant or the Sámi Prince and the Peasant Prince, one of the players can call for a single combat, when the pieces are moved towards each other in direct confrontation when one piece with the move will capture the other. This avoids a draw through an endless and futile chase.

9. If only the Sámi King and the Peasant King are left on the board the game is declared drawn.

Nils Keyland gives several examples of play in order to illustrate the rules. Concerning the strategy and tactics of this game, he writes that the unrestricted movement of the pieces, their right to retreat, should not be misused in such a way that the development of the game is hampered. Cautious, defensive tactics would be against the spirit of the game.

This is exactly the weak point in the rules of this variant of Sámi dablo. It shares the following rules with a lot of other games of the alquerque type: 1) captures are not mandatory, 2) pieces can move in all directions, 3) you must remove all enemy pieces to win, and 4) there is no promotion of pieces.

When these rules are combined, they result in a very tedious game that will normally last for several hundreds of moves.

Rule 8, according to which players are expected to move straight forwards with their pieces, and the player wins who is lucky enough to arrive at a position where he has the

right to capture, is not a satisfactory solution to the problem of endless, futile moves.

Other sources about North Scandinavian dablo games are few, short, and more or less incomplete. These sources, some of which are mentioned by Keyland, reveal that several variants existed.

In Åsele Lappmark, the combatants were Sámit vs. Russians/Karelians (Jonas Nensén, according to Drake 1918, p.291), and in Lycksele Lappmark they were Swedes vs. Russians (Gustaf Hallström, according to Keyland 1921, p.40).

In Frostviken smaller and larger boards were used. Karl Bernhard Wiklund describes in a note from 1892 a variant with 2x18 pieces including kings and princes, played on a board with 5x5 lines. The board pattern was identical with that used in the game described by Keyland, resulting in 41 crossing points. He adds that this game could also be played on a 7x7 board, that is a board with 85 crossing points, with 2x39 pieces.

Finally he mentions that after agreement between the two players the following rule can be used: the player, whose king has been captured by the other king, loses the game.

Thus the capture of a king was sufficient for a win.

Two other sources describe variants in which pieces could not move backwards, and probably only forwards, straight or diagonally.

In 1935 Olof Petter Pettersson completed a manuscript in which he described daily life among Swedish settlers in Dåres, Vilhelmina, Åsele Lappmark, around the middle of the 19th century (Pettersson 1999). In this manuscript he included a description of 'tavelspel', also named 'kloterspel'. The pieces used in this game had a shape similar to the shape of the pieces used for dablo in Frostviken and Lycksele Lappmark, but in this game there were no princes. Each player had one king, longer and thicker than the two sets of warriors.

The pieces of each player are placed in two rows along opposite

ends of the board. They move forwards on the lines from one crossing point to another adjacent point, and capture by the short leap. The board, 'tavla', has 144 'rutor' (fields or squares). In 1998 Sten Helmfrid (author of an excellent internet article on hnefatafl, Helmfrid 2005) proposed a reconstruction of the rules of the 'tavelspel' as a game played on the lines of a 12x12 board (13x13 points) with 2x26 pieces. He thought that it was a game with orthogonal moves and captures, similar to Turkish draughts. In an old version of the Turkish game the players were only allowed to have one 'padishah' (king) at a time. This reconstructed game does not function very well, however. Furthermore, the 144 fields or squares could just as well be interpreted as triangles. The largest 7x7 dablo board from Frostviken had exactly this number. O. P. Pettersson does not mention that this game, played by Swedish-speaking settlers in an area with many Sámi inhabitants, was also a popular Sámi game.

It is evident, however, that both the Sámit and their Swedish neighbours shared the same game.

From Åsele Lappmark another researcher, Jonas Nensén, recorded a few words about a 'tablo' game played by local Sámi people in the first half of the 19th century (Drake 1918, p.291). In this game each player had one king 'konges(a)', and 18 'tabloh', game pieces. The board is not described, but the 5x5 board with 41 points, the smallest board size used in Frostviken, would fit perfectly for this number of pieces.

From Jokkmokk, Lule Lappmark, we have another incomplete description of a 'tablo' game by Anta Pirak (Pirak 1933, p.17f.). This game is apparently played on a board consisting of 7x7 lines, and it seems that all pieces have the same rank. Only the central line of the board is empty at the beginning of the play. Pieces move forwards or "tvärt över" (sideways, or perhaps better: diagonally forwards) after the lines, to an adjacent point. They capture by the short leap. This game could be interpreted as a game with orthogonal

moves and captures, but in the light of what we know about Sámi game boards from Lule Lappmark, which had the board pattern known from alquerque de doze (5x5 or 9x5), I imagine that this 7x7 board had the same pattern, that is 49 points, and thus 2x21 pieces.

The Sea Sámit of Kvænangen, Troms, northern Norway, used to play 'tsukkalavde' with 2x12 pieces on the 5x5 board with this pattern (Larsen 1950, p.31f.). No kings or promotion are mentioned, and it seems that the pieces moved and captured in all directions. A 'tabla' game with 2x10 pieces from Tännäs, Härjedalen, northern Sweden (Lagercrantz 1939), might very well have been played on such a board.

In 1975 a 13th century or perhaps 16th century board of this type was found during excavations in Trondheim, Norway (Michaelsen 1998, p.36). It seems that, like hnefatafl, this medieval game survived among the Sámit long after it had fallen into oblivion elsewhere.

This overview of North Scandinavian dablo games seems to be exhaustive. A recent article by Rolf Kjellström (Kjellström 1992, see also Kjellström 2000) does not add any new information, and one might assume that these games are no longer played among the Sámit.

On basis of these scraps of information I have made a reconstruction of the 'tavelspel' from Dåres, or 'dablo' ('tablo') as the Sámit of this area named the game.

This reconstruction is also a sort of reconstruction of the 'dablot prejjesne' played in Frostviken. I do not doubt that Nils Keyland got precise information about this game from his source Anders Nilsson, but, based upon the sources mentioned above, I imagine that some Sámi players preferred a shorter, more dramatic game.

The only important difference between the dablo variants played in Frostviken and Lycksele Lappmark and those played in Åsele Lappmark, including Dåres, seems to be that in the former each player had a king and a prince, while in the latter they had

only a king. I suppose that as in the Frostviken game, the king could only be captured by another king, and that, after agreement of both players, a king capture was sufficient for a win. The rule that soldiers only moved forwards (but captured in all directions) is my interpretation of the information given by Pettersson and Pirak, and makes also the Frostviken variants shorter and more interesting. In order to make combinations possible, I have also introduced the rule that for the soldiers, capture is mandatory. I admit that this rule is not found in any historical sources. On the contrary, it seems that the Sámit did not even know the "huff" rule, popular among Scandinavian draughts players: that your opponent has the right to remove one of your pieces, if you refuse to make a capture. Even if probably not historically correct, obligatory capture greatly improves the Sámi dablo games.

To these rules Mats Winther has added two rules: 1) for the king, and for the king and prince in the game with both pieces, capture is optional, 2) if a player has lost all his pieces and only his king remains, he has lost the game. This 'bare king' rule is known from Shatranj and Medieval Chess, and certainly reduces the number of drawn games.

Mats Winther has implemented several of the Sámi dablo games using the Zillions-of-Games program.

With his 'Dablo Daares' one can play on the 7x7 board with 85 points with 2-4 rows of pieces per player (13-33 pieces). As a variant he has implemented 'Dablo Aasele', played on the 5x5 board with 41 points and 2x19 pieces, including the kings.

He explains the rules of 'Dablo Daares' in the following manner:

"Goal is either to capture the enemy king or reduce his forces so that only the king remains. All pieces move by single steps and can capture, by the short leap, in all directions. The soldier can only step in the three forward directions. Promotion does not occur. For the soldier, capture is mandatory. For the king, capture is optional. *The king can only be captured by the enemy king.*

"A piece moves to an empty adjacent point. If an adjacent point is occupied by an enemy piece, of the same rank or lower, and the point directly behind is vacant, then one may jump over it and capture it, as in checkers. Several pieces may be captured like this in a single turn."

With his 'Dablot prejjesne' ('Dablo') one can play on the 6x7 board with 72 points, using 2x30 pieces. As a variant Mats Winther has also implemented 'Dablo Frostviken', played on the 5x5 board with 41 points, using 2x18 pieces in total.

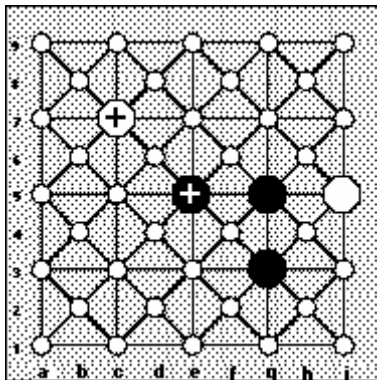
In these games each player has also a prince, which moves and captures like the king. For the prince, capture is optional, and one can only capture a piece of the same rank or lower. Pieces are ranked in this order: king, prince, and soldier.

Mats Winther has also suggested and implemented a variant with promotion. In this variant soldiers promote to prince when they reach the farthest rank. However, capture takes precedence over promotion.

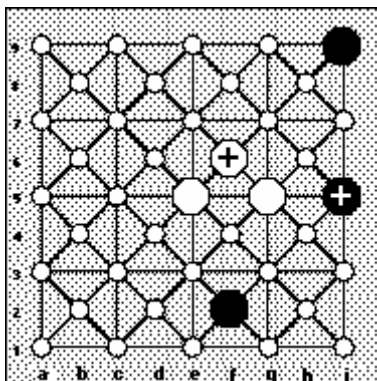
This rule seems quite logical, and the promotion to a major piece, but not to the all-important royal piece, is analogous to pawn promotion in Chess.

Concerning the strategy and tactics of these games Mats Winther writes that "as capture is mandatory for the soldier, it is sometimes possible to sacrifice one or more soldiers to enemy soldiers, thus to create a situation where the enemy king/king and prince can be captured. But it is not always adequate to make such combinations, if it leaves the opponent with a clear majority of soldiers, together with his remaining king. It is necessary to hunt enemy soldiers with the royal pieces, although this exposes them to combinations. A shortage of soldiers can lead to a lost game as it allows the opponent to continue exchanging soldiers until he wins according to the lone (bare) king rule."

Here follow two examples of simple combinations given by Mats Winther.

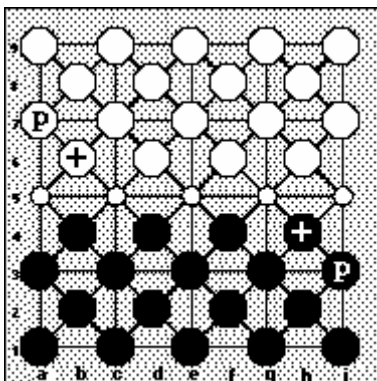


“Here black can win by moving the king to the left. This forces red to capture the soldier, which leaves the king en prise.”



“Another typical combination. Black moves the soldier to northwest, forcing the red soldier to capture. Thus, black can capture the enemy king in two consecutive jumps.”

With the help of these programs I am able to show a well-played sample game (Zillions vs. Zillions, expert level, 3 min. per move). In this reconstruction of ‘Dablo Frostviken’ the black prince is placed on i3, black king on h4, red king on b6, red prince on a7, with an empty line between the two armies.



- 1 Kh4-g5 Kb6-c5
- 2 Pi3-h4 Sd6-e5
- 3 Sf4xd6 Sc7xe5
- 4 Sh2-i3 Sh6-i5
- 5 Sb4-a5 Kc5-d6
- 6 Kg5-f4 Sb8-c7
- 7 Ph4-g5 Sc7-c5
- 8 Sd4xb6 Pa7xc5
- 9 Sa5-a7 Sa9xa5
- 10 Sa3xa7 Pc5-a5
- 11 Sa7-a9 Pa5-a3
- 12 Sc3-d4 Se5xc3
- 13 Sd2xb4 Pa3-c3
- 14 Si1-h2 Si5xi1
- 15 Se3-e5 Se7xi3
- 16 Sh2-g3 Si3xe3
- 17 Se1xe5 Si1xg3
- 18 Kf4-e3 Sf6xd4
- 19 Ke3xe7

and black captures the red king.

Personally, I prefer the shorter 41-point variants, but readers who prefer the larger chess variants may differ.

Mats Winther’s implementations can be downloaded from

<http://www.zillions-of-games.com/>

and from his own home page

<http://hem.passagen.se/melki9/>.

On these pages you can also find alquerque and draughts variants with interesting features similar to some of those found in dablo.

The capture rules of ‘Dablot prejjesne’ with three ranks of pieces are reminiscent of those found in the South Italian draughts variant ‘Damone’, and the ortho-diagonal captures can be found in another interesting draughts variant ‘Frisian checkers’. The notion of forward moving soldiers that do not promote, but can capture in all directions, is known from a Caucasian game, ‘Ossetian Checkers’. Alquerque games with kings *and* promotion are known from northern Africa, where ‘Zamma’ is a very prominent example of this type. The smaller, but not less interesting ‘Kharbaga’ from Mauritania has the same type of pattern as most of the ‘Dablo’ games. This pattern can also be found in games from other parts of Europe, in Indian games, and in games played by North American Indians. Another good alquerque game with promotion is the Indonesian ‘Permainan-Tabal’.

Mats Winther has also implemented ‘Medieval Alquerque’, medieval European variants played with short or long kings, according to rule reconstructions proposed by Arie van der Stoep.

Interested readers are welcome to contact me (pmi@km.dk).

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