

**Gaming with Odin:
Myth, Context and Reconstruction of
Hnefa-tafl, an Old Norse Board Game
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Hnefa-tafl or ‘Kings Table’ is a board game from medieval Scandinavia.¹ It is mentioned in Old Norse literary and mythological sources preserved in Icelandic manuscripts, such as the Eddic poem *Voluspá* [Völuspá]. The game fell out of popular usage in the medieval period and has been reconstructed in modern times as a board game and more recently, in a series of video games. The process of reconstructing *Hnefa-tafl* shows that a popular Old Norse game from the early medieval period can be reconstructed from the Sagas and archaeological evidence into a playable board and video game, and that the literary descriptions of this game have some echoes of a mythological world when viewed in the context of the mythic corpus, which is a reason for its popularity in contemporary ‘medievalism’.

Is *Tafl* a Product of “Medievalism”?

Tom Shippey describes “medievalism” as the “study of responses to the Middle Ages at all periods since a sense of the medieval began to develop”². This sense developed, according to Umberto Eco, at the moment the Middle Ages came to an end (65). These responses to the Middle Ages

¹ Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *Icelandic English Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1874), 275—“*Hnefi*” is translated as ‘the fist’ and also “the king in a kind of chess played by the ancients.” “*Tafl*” is described as being borrowed from the Latin *tabula* but borrowed at a very early time (621-622). Hence “kings table” under which name many modern versions of the game are available.

² Shippey, T.A. *Studies in Medievalism*. <<http://www.medievalism.net/>>.

include not only scholarly approaches, such as by scholars, historians, philologists, but also the use of such materials by artists, political movements for self-identity purposes and popular culture—including gamers.

The term “medievalism” has been used as a deprecating term by scholars from the nineteenth century to separate their “scientific” studies from the artistic, political and popular approaches to the Middle Ages (Biddick 1). These scholars tended to isolate particular aspects of the medieval world, and in doing so, set boundaries to the discipline of medieval studies. Those ideas and scholars which were considered to be non-scientific were thus easily segregated to the outer periphery of academia.³

In our current age, Eco writes that “there is a period of renewed interest in the Middle Ages, with a curious oscillation between fantastic neo-medievalism and responsible philological examination”(64). It could be argued that twenty-first-century people are fond of an escapist “dreaming of the Middle Ages,” but the common daily problems of the Western world emerged during the Middle Ages: modern languages, merchant cities, capitalistic economy (along with banks, cheques and interest rates), the rise of modern armies, and the modern concept of the nation state. The medieval age was also witness to the struggle between rich and poor, concepts of heresy or ideological deviation, conflict between church and state, and the technological transformation of labour (Eco 64). Eco writes that “our return to the Middle Ages is a quest for our roots and, since we want to come back to the real roots, we are looking for “reliable Middle Ages,” not for romance and fantasy, though frequently this wish is misunderstood and, moved by a vague impulse, we indulge in a sort of escapism á la Tolkien” (65).

Because the Middle Ages are imagined of in many different ways, Eco describes varieties of medievalism which can be useful to categorize which variety of Middle Ages one is speaking of. The reconstructed games of *tafl* mainly appeal to the idea of the Middle Ages as in Eco’s description of a “dream of a barbaric age,” which Eco writes is a “land of elementary and

³ Such as occurred to Michelet, the author of a popular study on medieval witchcraft and witch trials (Biddick 3).

outlaw feelings. . . these ages are Dark par excellence, and Wagner's *Ring*, itself belongs to this dramatic sunset of reason" (68). The appeal of early medievalism in a popular setting is also the appeal of an age that seems to be more heroic, when life was more dangerous and hence interesting, and, at least in the literature and epics, where the fates of the people hang in balance and only super-human efforts are able to bring about resolution.

Medievalism, then is a wide term to describe an attitude to the past, which includes both scholarly and popular cultural approaches to the medieval past. Reconstructing *tafl* is a product of medievalism; however the approach of the reconstructor or the game player will depend on whether the medievalist is "responsible" or "fantastic" to use Eco's descriptors. The "responsible" approach takes into account the cultural and literary background, while the other embellishes it with various fantasy elements.

Literary and Cultural Background of *Hnefa-tafl*

Hnefa-tafl or "*tafl*" is a strategic combat game that on first glance seems similar to chess: however, chess is usually said to be unknown in northern Europe before the 1200s (Simpson 165). *Tafl* is completely different to chess in layout and game-play as one side (the attackers) occupies the four edges of the board and the defenders the centre. While chess is a war-game, *tafl* is more of a hunt or chase game of a larger force of aggressors against a king protected by a much smaller retinue who must try to escape the battlefield (Parlett 186).

The main Old Norse literary sources for *hnefa-tafl* include the mythological poem *Voluspa* [*Völuspá*], the riddles of *King Heidrek's Saga*, a verse in *Orkneyinga Saga*, advice for a battle in *Frithiof's Saga* [*Friðþjófs Saga*] and an particularly violent episode in *Grettirs Saga*. Many references are just to "*tafl*" which many translators often write as chequers or chess; however Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson claim that whenever '*tafl*' was written in the sagas, it seems to mean *Hnefa-tafl* (275). Chess was later known and played by the Old Norse speaking peoples and was called *skak-*

tafl. Chess obviously outlived *hnefa-tafl*, and came to dominate medieval European strategy games.

Reconstructing *Hnefa-tafl*

In the 1890s chess historian Willard Fiske devoted some years to studying the problem of *Hnefa-tafl*. Although he died before completing his work, Fiske collected a great number of references to *tafl* and chess but does not find any solution to the *hnefa-tafl* question. The *tafl* problem was taken up by H. J. R. Murray who found that the eighteenth-century botanist and collector Carl Linnaeus (or Linne) (better known for being the ‘father of taxonomy’) had included a full description of the Saami game *Tablut* in his diaries⁴ (see also fig. 1) from his travels in Lapland in 1732, which were published in English in 1811 (Murray 443). Linnaeus wrote that:

The Tablut board is marked out in 9x9 squares, the central one being distinctive and known as *Konakis* or throne. Only the Swedish king can occupy this square. One player has eight blonde Swedes and their monarch; the other has sixteen dark Muscovites. The king is larger than the other pieces. The Muscovites are placed on the embroidered squares. (Bell I: 77)

Murray later returned to the problem of *Hnefa-tafl* in 1952 with more evidence and he theorized that the Germanic world (Scandinavia, Germany, Britain) shared a common game, which borrowed the name *tabula* from the Roman Empire (a classical game of the backgammon type) and applied it to a different game then popular in the Germanic world. Murray argues that *tafl* was this common Germanic game, and it was only after other board games (chess, checkers, etc.) were introduced that names to differentiate board games were required.

Murray summoned archaeological evidence such as numerous gaming pieces made from bone, glass, or amber, as well as several gaming boards. These include board fragments from Winmose in Denmark and another in the Gokstad ship—found near Oslo in Norway (58). The Winmose board has 18x18 squares. The game board from the Gokstad ship burial is a board of

⁴ Carl von Linne and James Edward Smith, *Lachesis Lapponica, or, A tour in Lapland* (London: White and Cochrane, 1811).

13x13 squares, with some decoration. Interestingly, the reverse side has a board for the game Nine Men's Morris⁵. Reversible boards are known from the sagas, e.g. in the *Saga of Ref the Sly* [*Króka-Ref's Saga*] (written between 1350-1400), where there is an expensive board given to King Harald which has the "old game with one king" (Clark 613) on one side (i.e. *tafl*) and a new game with two kings on the other, which would be chess.

There are also two interesting depictions of people playing a *tafl*-like game in the archaeological sources. The first is a detail from one of the now lost Horns of Gallehus, a set of two golden and richly decorated horns found in Jutland and created in 400-550 CE (Jones 71). The horn had a relief of two people standing and playing a game on a square board, which has representations of sixteen small disks along each edge. However, because this timeframe is very early, the game may be something else entirely. The second is on the Ockelbo rune stone from Sweden, which was lost in a fire in 1904 (Simpson 169). The stone is a commemorative one, and has a detail of two people drinking and sitting down to a board game with a significant central section and four corners, which is most likely to be *tafl*.

Thus, it is beneficial to view *tafl* as not one particular game, but a family of games. There are *hnefa-tafl*-like games across Northern Europe that are played on similar boards and move in similar ways, the descriptions of which are useful towards reconstructing the Norse game. For example, *tafl* games in Britain include the largest and most complex of the *tafl* family, *Alea Evangelii*. This was a game played in Anglo-Saxon Britain and claimed a Christian teaching aspect, as it purportedly involved the understanding of the four gospels. The Evangelical purpose was probably tacked on by monks who did not want to have this game banned, as were gambling and dice games. Interestingly, the game is played with the figures on the intersection of the lines, as in Nine Men's Morris. It may be that historically, *tafl* was also played like this. Modern players, so used to chess, prefer to use the spaces.

⁵ A widespread game of position and capture, Nine Men's Morris has been played in Ancient Egypt, Troy, Ireland, Norway and elsewhere. A. R. Goddard. *Nine Men's Morris*. Saga Book of the Viking Society vol 2, part 3. 1901. A variant of the game 'Twelve Men's Morris' was taken to North America by early English settlers. R. C. Bell. *The Boardgame Book*. Exeter Books, New York. 1983.

Additionally, the C.C.C. Oxon 122 manuscript preserved at Oxford University has a detailed diagram of the game, which shows a board of 18x18 squares (Robinson). In other Anglo-Saxon sources, the poem *The Fates of Men*⁶ mentions those who have “sumum tæfle cræft, bleobordes gebregd” [“skill at *tafl*, the trick of the coloured board” (163)].

Moreover, there are Welsh, Scottish and Irish contexts for understanding *tafl*. Robert Charles Bell cautiously writes that the Welsh game *tawlbwrdd* (throw-board) was likely *tafl* as introduced by the Norse (1: 45). A manuscript written by Robert ap Ifan in 1587 contains a description of the game, which reads:

. . .the above board must be played with a king in the centre and twelve men in the places next to him; and twenty-four lie in wait to capture him. These are placed, six in the centre of every end of the board and in the six central places. Two players move the pieces, and if one belonging to the king comes between the attackers, he is dead and is thrown out of play; and if one of the attackers comes between two of the king's men, the same.

If the king himself comes between two of the attackers and you say “Watch your king” before he moves onto that space, and he is unable to escape, you can catch him. If the other says *gwrheill* [?] and goes between the two, there is no harm. If the king can go along the line of that side wins the game. (Bell 1: 45)

In the Norse-influenced settlements of the Shetland Islands, a fragmented board of at least 9x9 squares was found in the Viking settlement at Jarlshof, which has a similar arrangement to *hnefa-tafl* but a central area of 5 squares in diameter within a circle and a larger blank area outside (Bell, “Tafl Games” 11). David Parlett's reconstruction suggests the placement of either eight or twelve guards around the king's central position (201). Another useful find was in Ireland. In 1932 a gaming board made from yew-wood and having 7x7 pegged spaces was found in an excavation at Ballinderry in Ireland, and has a suggested date range of 973-977 CE (T.D.K. 82). This aesthetically pleasing board was a high status wooden board, and the pieces fit into the holes with pegs (see fig. 2). This is the type of board that enables us to

⁶ *Fates of Men* in *Exeter Book* ed. Krapp, G.E. and Dobbie, E, London: Routledge, 1936.

visualize how in *Grettir's Saga*⁷ Thorbjörn Angle kills his step-mother after she pokes his eye out with a *tafl* piece which would have had a nail or sharp pin to affix it to the hole in the board (185)⁸.

Playing Rules

Objectives: In *tafl* the objectives for each force are different. For the King's team the objective is to move the King to safety to the corner of the board. For the opposing team the king must be surrounded and taken.

Moves: The players move one piece alternately. The King's team moves first. All pieces, even the King, move in any direction vertically or horizontally for any number of squares—like the rook in chess. All pieces may move through the centre square however only the King may remain there.

Captures: Pieces are captured when opposing pieces occupy both adjacent squares in a row or column. In gaming terms this is a “custodian” method of capture (Bell and Cornelius 45). A piece is also captured if it is caught between an opposing piece and one of the four corner square. Captures are only made if an opposing piece moves into the capture, thus a piece may be placed in between two opponents safely. In many modern versions, the King's capture is special and he may only be captured between four opposing pieces, or three pieces and a corner square. Captured pieces are taken from the board. If the King is captured, the opposing force wins.

Board Layout: The basic board layout used by many modern games of *tafl* combines the layout taken from Linneaus' *Tablut* with the safe zones as identified on the Norse board found in Ballinderry, Ireland. Historical board sizes for *tafl* family games include 7x7, 9x9, 11x11, 13x13 and 19x19 square boards. Modern games are usually 9x9 or 11x11 square boards. A smaller board size will mean a faster game. See Figure 5 for the initial setup of a 9x9 board. On the 9x9 board, the King (at the centre of the board) is surrounded by

⁷ The Saga of Grettir the Strong. Translated by G.A. Hight.

⁸ Another famous violent episode stemming from a game of *tafl* was between Earl Ulf and King Knut in 1027. During the game, Ulf showed bad sportsmanship and upturned the board and stormed off, to be murdered in revenge for the insult by Knut's men a few days later (McLean 112).

eight men. The opposing force has sixteen men which are on the four edges of the board.

Strategy and Variants: The strategy of the King is to escape the board quickly. Capturing opposing pieces quickly will free up escape routes. The main strategy of the opposing team is to block escape routes and then corner the king. The opposing team needs many pieces to do this and so must avoid capture and surround and contain the King. This strategy will remind the reader of Icelandic Sagas about the cruel practice of trapping and then burning enemy warrior families inside their long-houses, as in the famous *Njal's Saga* (265-269).

Bell indicates that “throw” in the Welsh version of *tafl* likely means that dice were likely incorporated into the game (Bell and Cornelius 44), and suggests that before each move the players would have thrown the die, and if they cast an even number they would miss their turn. This method would add quite an element of chance into the game. Robert ap Ifan’s description of the Welsh game doesn’t add dice, and in medieval Icelandic law dice games were condemned by outlawry (Fiske 334). So in the reconstructed *hnefa-tafl* we may discount the dice element, or leave it to serve as a variant (perhaps as a gambling one).

After playing some games of *tafl*, one problem that has been noted (Pritchard 179) is that the game is uneven. *Tafl*, if played with the basic rules, slightly favours the King’s side. However, this can be overcome by negotiating some rule variations. This would have been easy in the oral society where *tafl* originated, because the rules weren’t codified into a document. The agreed-upon rules could have been more open to negotiation, which would make the game more enjoyable to play against people of differing skill levels.

The easiest rule change to make is to limit the king in some way. An example from the sagas is that in—an example that supports this is that in the *Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*,⁹ the king in the *tafl* game is described as “defenceless” (i.e., probably not able to capture opponent pieces)—this may

⁹ *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*. Ed., Trans. Christopher Tolkien. London: Thomas Nelson, 1960.

have been a rule negotiation to make the game more balanced. Other ways to make the game more balanced include enabling the king to be captured only by two (not four) men, making the entire edge of the board the safe zone, or limiting the king to only moving four squares.

***Tafl* Rules in Literature**

There are two riddles between Gestumblindi (Odin [Óðinn] in disguise) and King Heidrek from *Saga of King Heidrek the Wise* that discuss the layout and rules of *Hnefa-tafl*. These are riddles thirteen and sixteen.

The Thirteenth Riddle:

Hverjar eru þær snótir
er um sinn drottin
vápnláusan vega;
inar jarpari hlífa
um alla daga,
en inar fegri fara?
Heiðrekr konungr,
hyggðu at gátu!

“Góð er gáta þín, Gestumblindi, getit er þessar; þat er hnettafl; inar dökkri verja hneffan, en hvítar sækja.”

*What women are they
warring together
before their defenceless king;
day after day
the dark guard him,
but the fair go forth to attack?
This riddle ponder,
O prince Heidrek!*

“Your riddle is good, Gestumblindi,” said the king. “I have guessed it. This is the game of hnefatafl; the darker ones defend the hnefi but the white ones attack.” (Tolkien 38)

This riddle describes the status of the king piece as ‘defenceless’, and also the colours of the pieces: the defenders are described as dark and the attackers fair. It also seems to indicate that *tafl* could be played by women as well as men and that it was a game that was enjoyed often.

The Sixteenth Riddle:

Hvat er þat dýra,
 er drepr fé manna
 ok er jární kringt útan;
 horn hefir átta, en höfuð ekki,
 ok fylgja því margir mjök?
 Heiðrekr konungr,
 hyggðu at gátu!

‘Þat er húnn í hnettafli.’

*What is that creature
 that kills men's flocks—
 with iron all about it is bound;
 eight its horns are
 but head it has none:
 there are many that move at its side?
 This riddle ponder,
 O prince Heidrek!*

“That is the húnn in hnefatafl,” said the king. (Tolkien 39)

The use of the word *húnn* is problematic. It has two main meanings, “knob” or “game piece” and also “young bear.” In the younger version of manuscript of *Heidrek's Saga*, the copyist has added a clue for the solution: “it has the same name as a bear, it runs as soon as it is thrown” (Tolkien 39). This is sometimes taken to mean that *hnefa-tafl* is always played with a dice, but Christopher Tolkien argues that because *tafl* is a game of skill, the interpretation of playing with dice should be rejected (88). The *húnn* therefore means that the pieces are smooth and headless, as the king is the only decorated piece.

The overall object of the game is well described in *Frithiofs Saga*, where Frithiof advises Hilding on tactics in war, by reference to the game of *Hnefa-tafl* he is currently playing. He says that there “is a bare place in your board which you cannot cover, and I will beset your pieces there.” Björr answers: “A double game, and two ways of meeting your play!” Frithiof answers that “Your game is to attack the *Hnefi* [King], and the double game is assured” (Parlett 202). The double game could refer to the strategy of the king

manoeuvring to a square where he has two escape routes to the edge available—and a sure victory¹⁰.

Context: *Völuspá* (Old Norse Mythic Poem) and Tafl: the Game of Elites

Hnefa-tafl is not just an interesting game. It is an artefact that is mentioned in mythological Old Norse texts, and so may have had a significant meaning in Old Norse mythology. In order to be able to understand *tafl* in the mythic world view we need to examine descriptions of *tafl* in Old Norse sources as part of the whole corpus of Old Norse myth (what we have of it) and to seek to place the myth into the context of cultural categories that have what Margaret Clunies Ross describes as “recoverable meanings, when considered in the light of what is now known of early Scandinavian society and its modes of thought” (1: 19).

To understand *tafl*, we need to look at how the game is presented and compare it to other examples of the game in the Old Norse mythic world, and also in the context of the society in which the myth was recorded, that is, of medieval Iceland.

The poem *Völuspá* is the most important mythological source for the game *tafl*. *Völuspá* is the first poem of the *Poetic Edda*, the Old Norse compilation of mythological poetry in the Codex Regius. The poem is usually dated to ca. 1000 CE and is the only mythological Old Norse poem to exist in two separate written sources that do not appear to derive from a common written original (Dronke 63; Clunies Ross 1: 23).

Völuspá is a monologue spoken by a *völva* or prophetess, who has probably returned from the dead. She addresses the god Odin who asked her to speak her ancient knowledge. The *völva* recalls the time before the elements were formed and the world created. She tells of the ordering of the world by Odin and his brothers, of the work of the *Aesir*, who are the first and dominant family of gods. The *Aesir* build temples, forge tools, and live in a golden age, playing *tafl* until the arrival of three giantesses interrupts this golden age. The

¹⁰ This idea has been explored as a strategy in the game “Viking Siege” (see below) by Cliff and Rod Edwards.

völva next narrates the creation of the dwarves, and of the first humans. She also mentions the world-tree *Yggdrasill* and the well of the three Norns, who roughly represent the past, present and future and who cast lots to determine human fate.

Next the prophetess discusses the war between the Aesir (the dominant family of the gods which includes Odin, Tyr [Týr], Thor [Þórr] and Baldur [Baldr] in their number) and the Vanir (the second family of gods which includes Freyr, Freyja and Njörd [Njörðr]). The Aesir try to burn the Vanir Gullveig (Gold Drink) (who is probably an aspect of Freyja) who is thrice reborn and becomes Heid (Seeress) who teaches Seidh [*seiðr*] or witchcraft among human women. Odin attacks with his deadly spear but the Vanir gods survive to make peace with the Aesir. Other divine characteristics of the gods are introduced, such as Odin's pledging his eye for a draft of mead from Mimir's Well and Thor's giant-slaying prowess, as well as the tragedy of the death of Baldur, Odin's son. The poem then devotes considerable space to the very ominous buildup towards the final battle at Ragnarok (doom of the gods). A golden cock crows, which wakes up Odin. He, Thor and Freyr are killed in the battle. The sun goes black, the land sinks into the sea, the stars recoil and vanish and flames consume the world. But still further the *völva* sees, to a time when the earth rises from the ocean, green once again. Some of the gods survive and the Aesir meet again with Baldur, who returns from the dead. The golden *tafl* set will be found in the grass, crops will return, and the gods and men will live in wealth and joy.

In *Völuspá*, *tafl* is mentioned at two key places, stanzas 8 and 61. In stanza 8, *tafl* is introduced:

Teflðo í túni, teitir vóro,
var þeim vættergis vant ór gulli,
unz þriar qvómo þursa meyar,
ámátcar miöc, ór iötunheimom.¹¹

*They [the gods] played [tafl] in the meadow,
they were merry—*

¹¹ *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*. Ed. Gustav Neckel. Rev. Hans Kuhn. Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1962.

*for them there was no
want of gold—
until there came three
ogres' daughters,
of redooubtable strength, from Giant Realms. (Dronke 9)*

Immediately before playing *tafl*, the Aesir family of gods had created the world, allotted names to things, built the ideal temples and altars, founded forges and created wealth for themselves, as well as tools. The gods were merry, and it was their Golden Age which was to be ultimately sundered by conflict with the giants.

Three themes that arise from the descriptions of *tafl* in the mythological sources are firstly, as a game of the elites, secondly its role in the conflicts that face the gods, thirdly as the golden game of the gods and fourthly as part of the renewal of the world after Ragnarok.

Tafl was the pastime of the gods, and furthermore, their *tafl* set was made of gold (*Völuspá* 58). Gold signifies great wealth and privilege. Rulers did indeed seek to further their wealth; however generosity was seen as a greater virtue, and rulers maintained their power by being generous and giving away wealth.

The Old Norse mythic world is very hierarchical. At the top are the Aesir family of the gods. After they create humanity from Ash and Elm wood, they endow these humans with their intellectual and essential faculties. In the mythic poem the *Lay of Rig* [*Rígsþula*] stanza 42, a god calling himself “Rig”, probably Odin¹², travels through the land and meets a representative of each social class. With these, he inspires them to bear children and has a formative influence on them. The older sons of Jarl (Earl) learned swimming and *tafl* (Hollander 127). Clunies Ross writes that this element of the *Lay of Rig* is a variation on myths of the royal descent from the gods. Interestingly—all people are descended from Rig, not just the Kings, although *tafl* is definitely for the Earls and Nobles (1: 180).

¹² In the fourteenth-century *Codex Wormianus* the god Heimdall is put forward as taking the name Rig; however a god travelling the land under a pseudonym fits the profile of Odin rather than any other god (Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993, p 264).

In *Orkneyinga Saga* Earl Rognvald Kali, boasts in verse about his skills as a youth:

Tafl emk örr at efla,
 Iþróttir kannk nú,
 Týnik trauðla rúnum,
 Tíð er mér bók ok smíðir.
 Skríða kannk á skíðum,
 Skýtk ok rœ’k, svát nýtir,
 Hvárt tveggja kannk hyggja
 Harpslött ok bragþötu.¹³

*At nine skills I challenge—
 a champion at tafl;
 runes I rarely spoil,
 I read books and write;
 I’m skilled at skiing
 and shooting and sculling
 and more—I’ve mastered
 music and verse.* (Pálsson and Edwards 108)

***Tafl* and Conflict**

In the Old Norse sagas, games are mentioned for a purpose. They are not described just as filler, as game episodes enable the reader to learn about the character and motivations of the players (Martin 38). Game playing gives remarkable insight into the “history and social life of the people, what they felt was important and how they regarded themselves in relationship to the rest of the world” (Goodfellow 79). How the games are played reveals the nature of the players.

Similarly, in the mythological sources, how games are played enables us to learn about the nature of the supernatural players. In *Voluspa* 8, the giantesses who come to the gods while they play at *tafl* cause a great disturbance. Van Hamel argues that the author of *Voluspa* chose to represent the antagonism between the giants and the gods starting as a game of *Tafl* (227). Support for this idea is in the answer to one of the Riddles of *Heidreks Saga*:

Hverir eru þeir þegnar . . .
 At byggja bólstaði?

¹³ *Orkneyinga Saga*. Ed. Finnogi Guðmundsson. Reykjavík: Íslensk Fornrit, 1965.

“... þat er Ítrekr ok Andaðr er þeir taflí sínu.”

*What thanes are they. . .
seeking a place to settle?*

“... *These are Itrek and Andad, sitting at their [tafl] board.*”
(Tolkien 37)

Tolkien notes that Ítrekr may be a name for Odin, and Andad or Önduðr is found in a list of giant names (37), so it is just conceivable that the pieces in this game were thought of as representing a conflict between the gods and the giants.

Tafl, as the game of the gods, may mirror the actual situation of hierarchical inequality between the gods and the giants, as it is a war game played between unequal forces (Clunies Ross 1: 161). In Old Norse myths, the giants are portrayed as powerful and destructive forces which are however overcome by the gods. The gods impose order on the cosmos, while the giants upset or subvert that order. Once the gods have ordered the universe, they happily play their game, which is a reflection of the vital first age of the world; there is no lack of wealth and diminution of power. There is also no rivalry—the gods only playfully challenge each other. Unfortunately for the gods, others also want to play their game. From *Jotunheim*, the land of the giants, three young ogresses come and bring an end to the golden age.

The Giants pose a threat to the enclosed world of gods and men. They occupy a sometimes positive, but mostly negative role in Old Norse myth. Clunies Ross indicates that this unequal situation is a state of “negative reciprocity” (95)—and this is most telling in the social situation in which the *Aesir* gods may marry giantesses, but do not reciprocate by letting giants marry goddesses. Gods rebuke giants in *Völuspá* 8, presumably as marriage partners. This sets up a great feud between the giants and the gods, to coalesce in the final battle at *Ragnarok*.

The major conflict of the Old Norse mythic world is the Doom of the Gods, *Ragnarok*. The renegade or trickster god Loki and the giants amass a huge force, together with many unique monstrous beasts, which are the

products of Loki's shamefully breeding with the giants via sexual inversion of the normal social order.

***Tafl* and the Golden Ages of the Gods**

As a game for the nobles and worthy of the gods, the *tafl* game from *Völuspá* is made of gold. At the early stages of the poem, gold is seen in a purely positive light and this is the time which Snorri Sturluson in the *Poetic Edda* describes “ok er sú öld kölluð gullaldr”¹⁴ [“that age is known as the golden age” (Sturluson 16)]. The Golden Age begins to unravel with the arrival of the three giantesses who interrupt the game.

After the interrupted *tafl* game, subsequent wars and the final battle at Ragnarok, there seems no hope for men or gods. However, at this darkest hour, the prophetess knows older knowledge, and is able to see beyond the destruction, that the earth rises up again, the grass grows green. The remaining *Aesir* regroup, and fortuitously the golden *tafl* set is found again, as stanza 61 of *Völuspá* explains:

Par muno eptir	undrsamligar
Gullnar töflor	í grasi finnaz,
Þærs í ardaga	attar höfðo. ¹⁵

*There will once more the miraculous
golden [tafl-pieces] be found, in the grass,
those that in the old days they had owned.* (Dronke 23)

After this the cornfields grow by themselves, all harms will be healed, Baldur will return from the dead and inhabit Odin's halls. A further hall has now been established, roofed with gold for the glory of the righteous warriors.

Dronke writes that from the good fortune of the finding of the golden pieces there follows a full and confident prediction of a new fertile and auspicious earth and homelands (60). The game of *tafl* in *Völuspá* creates an important link between the golden age of the gods, and the renewal of the world after *Ragnarok*.

¹⁴ Snorri Sturluson. *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*. Ed. Anthony Faulkes. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1988.

¹⁵ *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius* Op cit.

This myth of the renewal of the world points to an idea of cyclical time in Norse myth as it would seem to be the same earth returning, the return of the same golden *tafl* set, and the same home of the gods – an Eliadian ‘eternal return’ (Eliade 86). However, Clunies Ross comments that, far from being cyclical time, the renewal occurs only once, not again and again (1: 241).

The last ominous sign in *Völuspá* occurs at the end of the poem where Nidhogg [Niðhogg], the dragon of death who lives on after Ragnarok is done. This is a sign that there is still threat and danger in the Old Norse mythic world, and that there is possibly more, as yet untold, in the unfolding of the fates of gods, giants, humanity and the game *tafl*.

***Tafl* Renewed in the Modern World**

Tafl games may have influenced the masterpiece of Scandinavian medieval game art—the Isle of Lewis Chess set, found stowed in a sandbank on the Isle of Lewis (UK) in 1831, and roughly dated to the 1150s-1200s (Stratford 40). The Lewis Chessmen are very finely carved from walrus tusk ivory. Martha Bayless writes that the king figure is shown bearded and seated, which corresponds to an amber king piece from Denmark (38). Bayless also relates this to a connection with the god Thor, who in a statuette found in Iceland, is also shown bearded and seated (Simpson 187).¹⁶

The first popular reconstruction and publication of a *Hnefa-Tafl* game occurred in America in 1863, during the American Civil War. This game was called “Freedom’s Contest” or “The Battle for the Union”; the king was renamed the “Rebel Chief” and the pieces are Rebel and Union soldiers. In this version, to try to offset the imbalance in the game, the General (taking over from the medieval King-piece) was limited to move four spaces at a time (Gardner 129). The creator of this game probably used the notes on the indigenous Saami Tablut game described in Linnaeus’s Lapland diaries,

¹⁶ A problem with this argument, however, is that Thor was not considered to be the ‘king’ of the gods, that role would fall to his father, Odin. Nevertheless Thor was a more popular god in the heathen period in Iceland (Turville-Petre, 86).

published in English in 1811, and thought them useful enough to create into a contemporary battle game.

Tafl sets are now available commercially, and generally any museum that houses a Viking or Anglo-Saxon collection has a set or two available in their gift-shop, some of which have pieces modelled after the Lewis Chessmen. Commercial and hand made wooden sets—ranging in quality (and price) are also available at medieval re-enactment festivals ranging from the light-hearted “Renaissance Faires” and Society of the Creative Anachronism festivals to gatherings of serious re-enactment or “living history” groups. *Tafl* also has a strong appeal to those involved with modern Pagan or Heathen religions such as Odinism and Asatru [*Ásatrú*]*—*modern reconstructed religious traditions which take their practices from the old gods and myths of the Germanic cultures (Strmiska and Sigurvinsson 126-179).

Following in the footsteps of the “Battle for the Union,” *tafl* games have also been used for modern board games. The 1966 Milton Bradley board game “Goldfinger: A James Bond 007 Game” is *tafl* dressed up in a tuxedo and spy-gadgets. In 2002 the game “Thud!” was produced by the Cunning Artificer Company, based on *tafl*, but with modifications, especially on capture techniques. Set in the popular ‘Discworld’ fantasy setting of fantasy author Terry Pratchett, “Thud!” depicts a battle between dwarves and trolls. In 2003 an Australian version of *tafl* was created which depicts not battles between Norse warriors, but rather bushranger Ned Kelly’s gang and the colonial troopers at the siege of Glenrowan in 1880.¹⁷

***Tafl* as a Computer Game**

Several video game versions of *tafl* have been made available. Some are commercial releases and others are made by game hobbyists or *hnefa-tafl* enthusiasts. Five games are described below. Computer game creators are not limited to just recreating a board game, they can create an atmosphere and story around the game, and set it into part of a campaign. This framing of *tafl*

¹⁷ *Game Ned Kelly*. CMK Partners. 2004.

places it more into the structure of games that medievalism gamers would expect—that of roleplaying and action / adventure, where the gamer completes a series of quests—an idea itself taken from heroic literature and folklore themes, and very prominent in modern fantasy literature. In creating these additional features to the games, the reconstruction adds more fantasy elements and hence is not as “reliable” as an experience of an early medieval game; however that is not to say that the game is any less enjoyable.

The first modern digital iteration of *tafl* is *Kings Table: The Legend of Ragnarok*;¹⁸ this 1993 commercial release of a *tafl* based video game came packaged in an atmospheric box, featuring the shadow of a medieval cowed figure behind a finely crafted *hnefa-tafl* set. The medieval age is further signified by a candle as well as a mystical glass orb. The game is played on an 11x11 square board. There is a semi-runic interface to the game, and the board has a backdrop of a medieval table, which gives the impression of sitting down to the game. A candle, gold coins and a tankard complete the medieval feel.

There are three ways this version can be played—in Kings Table mode, where the player seeks to win against one of a dozen locals, or in the “Ragnarok” campaign. This is described in the game’s manual that Odin has learned via magical means that the doom of the gods is approaching and he needs to read patterns in human behaviour in order to find a way to overcome Ragnarok. He devises a special *tafl* game in order to observe the patterns of humans more closely, and then assumes a human form and heads to a tavern. In the tavern Odin plays against a variety of human opponents. Odin is portrayed as the king figure. The third way to play the game is against another human opponent, sharing the same computer. In this way it becomes an electronic form of the original board game.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Kings Table: The Legend of Ragnarok*. Imagitec Design, 1993. 30 April 2006. <<http://www.abandonia.com/games/286/KingsTable-TheLegendofRagnarok>>.

¹⁹ An obvious influence on this rendition of *tafl* is the popular 1988 computer game “Battle Chess,” published by Interplay. It was so popular that it was published for over ten different operating systems. “Battle Chess” featured amusing animations of chess pieces vanquishing each other when a piece was captured, and opened chess to an audience used to action or arcade games.

The main difference between scholarly reconstructed *tafl* and the *Legend of Ragnarok* game is that each side may have up to four of their pieces derived from Old Norse myth with differing moves and abilities mainly derived from chess. An example is Loki, who due to his cunning in the myths, can move diagonally in any direction; however due to his perversity, he cannot move vertically and horizontally like a normal piece. These additional figures place an added degree of difficulty to the game, as well as require frequent checking with the manual about what they can do, which could be distracting for a new player. However, in expanding *tafl* to have more pieces, the game designers give the game some chess-like aspects and thus make it more understandable to players who are not familiar with *tafl*. Increasing the complexity of the game may also have the benefit of keeping the attention of players who enjoy a challenge, are expecting more fantastic medievalism elements or who are already familiar with *tafl* and require additional features to justify buying the game. *Legend of Ragnarok*'s mythic background departs from standard Old Norse myth, but the game creators have highlighted the idea that *tafl* is indeed a 'game of the gods' and that it does have a mythological significance, which is an element that is not generally explored by game scholars, much less game publishers (see figs. 3 & 4).

The second contemporary version, Ludoteka.com, is a popular multiplayer game server running on the Java platform. Ludoteka hosts varieties of ancient and more recent games, from Anglo-American draughts to the modern game *Unlur*, including a version of *tafl*. Ludoteka uses the 'tablut' name from Linneaus. The game features a clear and easy to use interface of 9x9 squares. There is no single player game—you must play against another person using Ludoteka. Ludoteka is reconstructed *tafl*, and playing against someone across the internet is almost like playing them at a table. The main limitations are that because a computer program is moderating the game, no informal rules can be introduced. The server keeps track of scores and players compete for ranking.

Available only as an online game, Ludoteka *tafl* has no merchandising for sale and its business model is to have people subscribe for unlimited

playing time. Users can play for free, however for only a limited period each day. Ludoteka is also supported by small and relatively unobtrusive advertising.

The Ludoteka *tafl* version is based on the reconstructed *tafl* games and contains no mythic context. It has no introduction or story screens and is a completely reliable reconstruction of the game. Naming the game with the Linnean name of the game “Tablut,” it could be argued, places this game outside the realm of medievalism reconstructions as it is solely basing it on the version collected from Lapland. This may make the game less attractive to those interested in fantastic renditions of medievalism; however Ludoteka has a wide linkage from websites interested in reconstructed *tafl* (see fig. 5).

Viking Siege by EBro Software²⁰ (2000), a downloadable freeware DOS based game, is a third contemporary version of *tafl*. It features multiple game boards (7x7, 11x11 and 13x13). As in *Legend of Ragnarok* the game has a strong mythic component. The *Viking Siege* game has the variant that the king must get to any part of the edge of the board to win. The game is conceptualized as the human player using the board as a mythic link to *Asgard*, the realm of the gods, and the human can play various mythological or historical figures that dwell in the land of the gods. In the mythic frame of this game, which differs from the traditional account in *Völuspá*, one of the amusements of the dead heroes in *Asgard* is to play *tafl*.

The artificial intelligence in this game is well developed and is quite robust. While there is not a campaign-style program in the game, the advanced player can change who he or she is playing against. A handy “hint” feature of the game is really useful for beginner players. The mythic and more fantastic frame of the game, where the gamer is connected to *Asgard*, is not very obtrusive for those who want to just play *tafl* without speculating about the context, and it is very useful to be able to play on a variety of board sizes (see fig. 6).

²⁰*Viking Siege*. EBro Software. 2000. 30 April 2006. <<http://www.user.dccnet.com/cedwards/index.html>>.

Tablut Online

The fourth contemporary reimagining of *tafl* is *Tablut Online* (2005), a modestly priced commercial 3D animated campaign-style *tafl* game developed by Mythic Interactive.²¹ The game allows the player to generate a character, complete with name and “avatar.” Of the five games described in this paper, this one and AGON have the most modern, 3D graphics. Locations are animated and, as in the *Legend of Ragnarok*, the captures have an animated component; however it differs from the *Battle Chess* style of animated capture in that a mysterious lightning effect centres on the captured piece. The game may be played as in the *Ludoteka* *tablut* game against another online player, which is coordinated via the game server. The campaign setting is a fantasy medieval Europe. The player travels around on his or her quest to become the greatest *tafl* player in the known world. This is perhaps a more peaceful re-enactment of early medieval cultural migrations and conflicts!

This game adds complexity through a series of rankings as well as being able to wager gold and also win items to be used later in the game. The game play is very user friendly, with the board able to be viewed from many different angles, which is an aid to the player and replicates real-life play. As the player manages to beat the *tafl*-masters scattered across this fantasy Europe, the player unlocks further features in the game, such as being able to assume the “avatar” of one of the vanquished foes. This may enable users to show opponents that they have reached a certain level of skill.

The influence of popular medievalism is apparent; for example, avatars that may be chosen include *Lord of the Rings* “Gandalf style” figures, a selection of Norse Vikings and kings, as well as characters in very late medieval garb and even a character modelled off Captain Jack Sparrow of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) film (see fig. 7).

²¹ *Tablut Online*. Mythic Interactive. 2004. 30 April 2006. <<http://www.tablutoonline.com>>.

AGON: Adventure in Lapland

In a reflexive or genre self-analysing moment for video gaming, a game about reconstructing games appeared in 2004. It is called *AGON: Ancient Games Of Nations*²² and is an episodic adventure game based around a British Museum researcher who has to collect a range of forgotten games in order to solve a dire mystery concerning supernatural board games and save the world (see figs. 8 & 9). The game features 3D graphics, soundtrack and—of course—the ability to play the games within the game. *AGON* is a point and click style adventure, a style best known from early Sierra games. Apart from the adventure component, *AGON* also has a “netboard” feature whereby registered users may challenge fellow *AGON* players to a game.

Episode two of *AGON* is set in Lapland and parallels Linneaus’ journey there (see fig. 10). This episode contains the fifth modern reconstruction of *tafl* that we will consider. The *tafl* version used is the Saami game of Tablut which is very well rendered by the game. The game creators have a very exacting attention to detail, and the game is peppered with period documents and settings. When it came to the game of Tablut, the game creators actually created a Saami style version of the game with the same sort of materials used by the Saami—leather and textiles and had it photographed for use in the game.

This game does not have a medieval setting at all; in fact, it is an early modern Victorian setting. The game itself is the version collected by Linnaeus in 1732, and re-enacts a journey to Lapland in order to discover the game. The player must beat an opponent in *tafl* to continue. After this, the *tafl* game is ‘unlocked’ and can be played at any time.

The idea that a board game can be the agent of divine powers is shared with *King’s Table* and *Viking Siege*. This idea is consistent with the Old Norse mythological poem *Völuspá* in that the game of the gods does have an effect on the world of men, albeit indirectly in the traditional sources, as when it is upset by giants the process of the Doom of the Gods (Ragnarok) begins, and

²² *AGON: Ancient Games Of Nations*. Private Moon Studios, 2004. 30 April 2006. <<http://www.agongame.com>>.

afterwards, the finding of the game pieces again is an image of a renewed world.

Reconstruction of a Northern Medievalism

The attraction of a Northern Medievalism is easily attested by the popularity of Old Norse themes in popular literature and culture from the early nineteenth century and onwards. Champions of this theme include William Morris, Thomas Percy and Thomas Gray²³. Medieval Scandinavian cultures were attractive to a wide range of writers, artists, composers because of three main ideas: that “the ‘Goths’ were champions of liberty,” that all of the Germanic peoples shared political and legal institutions and importantly, that there was a “lure of the romanticised Scandinavian past, as propagated in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century literature” (Barnes 167).

In the search for “roots” medieval Norse themes for nationalistic and self-image reasons were explored by many people with a cultural background of Germanic language speaking peoples, with some of the more obvious examples coming from outside Scandinavia—and at its worst and most twisted, the Nazi Germany manipulation of Viking themes is well known (Wilson 189). A more positive and life-affirming aspect of holding the Vikings up as proud ancestors is the Minnesota Vikings—a football team from an area of America which had a large influx of Scandinavians, along with a variety of controversial “discoveries” of fake Norse artefacts such as the Kensington Rune Stone arising around the time of the fascination from within and without academia with the pre-Columbian Viking voyages to North America around the year 1000 (Magnusson and Pálsson 9).

Since Tolkien’s publication of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1954, heroic fantasy inspired by medieval themes and characters has exploded. Tolkien’s opus itself has at its foundation a very strong element of Old Norse myth (Clunies Ross 2: 190). An appreciation of Tolkien’s mythic vision is often a starting point for individuals to be interested in “creative anachronism” groups, and themes from *The Lord of the Rings* commonly show up in most

²³ See Clunies Ross, Margaret. *The Norse Muse in Britain, 1750-1820*. Trieste: Parnaso, 1998.

heroic fantasy literature and genres in other formats derived from it, such as fantasy role-playing games, board and card games, fantasy films, computer games and even heavy metal and gothic music.²⁴

Reconstructing and playing *tafl* is a product of medievalism, a medievalism that is inspired by a search for roots in the Middle Ages and of the adventure of playing a game that lay dormant in Northern Europe (except in Lapland) for many centuries. Medievalism promotes the study and teaching of the medieval period, not just in academic circles, but well beyond it, into subcultures such as re-enactors, living history enthusiasts and *Asatru* believers who all have strong affinities and invest a lot of their time and resources into interacting with and (re)developing skills and activities that have been neglected since the early middle ages. Towards this end, the *tafl* family of games plays a small but interesting part.

The Old Norse mythic world fascinates many people, not only because of its dramatic and complex tales but also because it is the most preserved mythology of pre-Christian medieval Europe. Combined with the attraction that the medieval age exerts on many people, it is not surprising that *tafl* is now available again in a multiplicity of formats. The study of games is not trivial, as games reveal cultural meanings, aspirations and even mythological conceptions of the universe. The reconstruction of *tafl* is a further step in understanding the medieval world, and gives scholars and enthusiasts a clearer idea of the references to the game in the Old Norse sagas, which would seem to make much less sense when ascribed to the later game of chess.

Tafl is a fast-paced, strategic game that is interesting to play. The reconstruction and world-wide acceptance and subsequent re-interpretation have made *hnefa-tafl* an Old Norse cultural artefact that has a new life in popular culture—one could say a ‘renewal’ in its context of Old Norse myth. And perhaps players find much in agreement with the Anglo-Saxon author of the *Exeter Book*, who wrote in the *Maxims* that when “two shall sit at *tæfl*

²⁴ Author Terry Pratchett makes the observation that “Most modern fantasy just rearranges the furniture in Tolkien's attic” (Nicholls).

until their sorrow glides away from them; they forget harsh fate and enjoy themselves at the table”²⁵ (Page 163).

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










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²⁵ “Hy twegen sceolon tæfle ymb sittan, þenden him hyra torn togliðe,/forgietan þara geocran gesceafta, habban him gomen on borde.” *Maxims I* in *Exeter Book*.

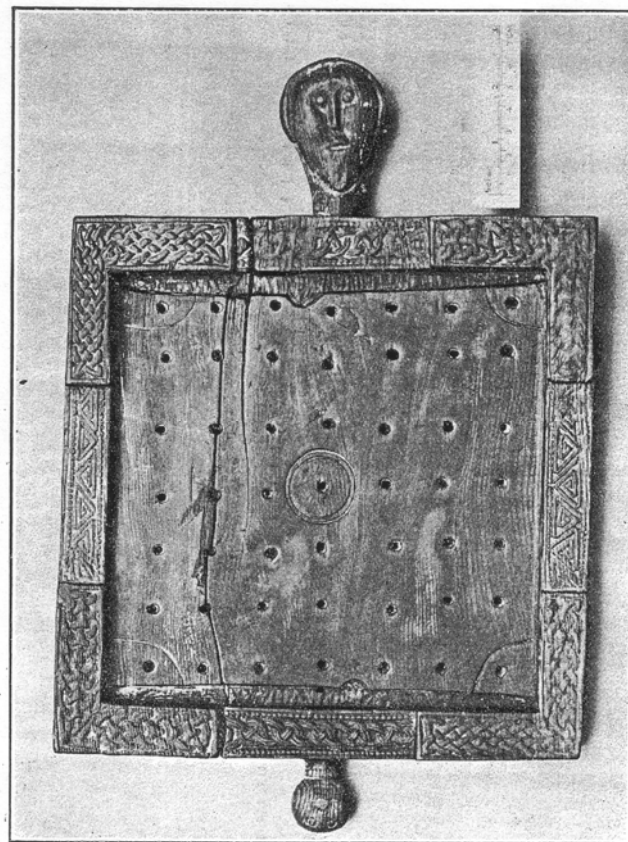
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Appendix: Illustrations

o	n	m				M	N	O
l	k	i	h		H	I	K	L
g	f	e	d		D	E	F	G
	c	b	a		A	B	C	
								
	c	b	a		A	B	C	
g	f	e	d		D	E	F	G
l	k	i	h		H	I	K	L
o	n	m				M	N	O

Chpt. 9, Fig. 1. Tablut from Linnaeus' diaries.



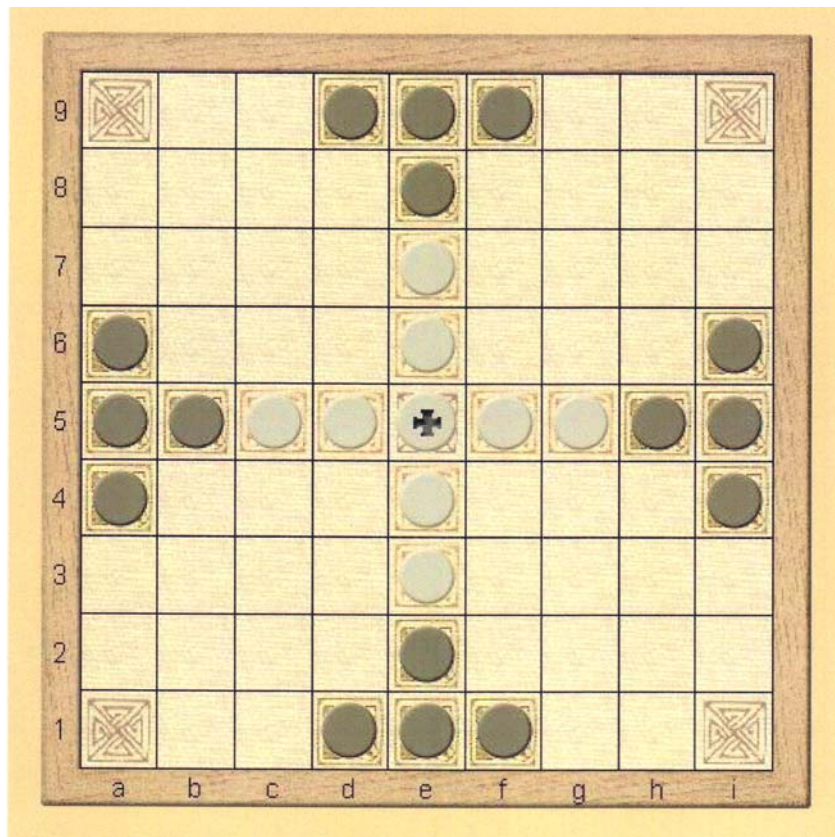
Chpt. 9, Fig. 2. Pegged tafl board from Ballinderry.
Courtesy the Viking Society.



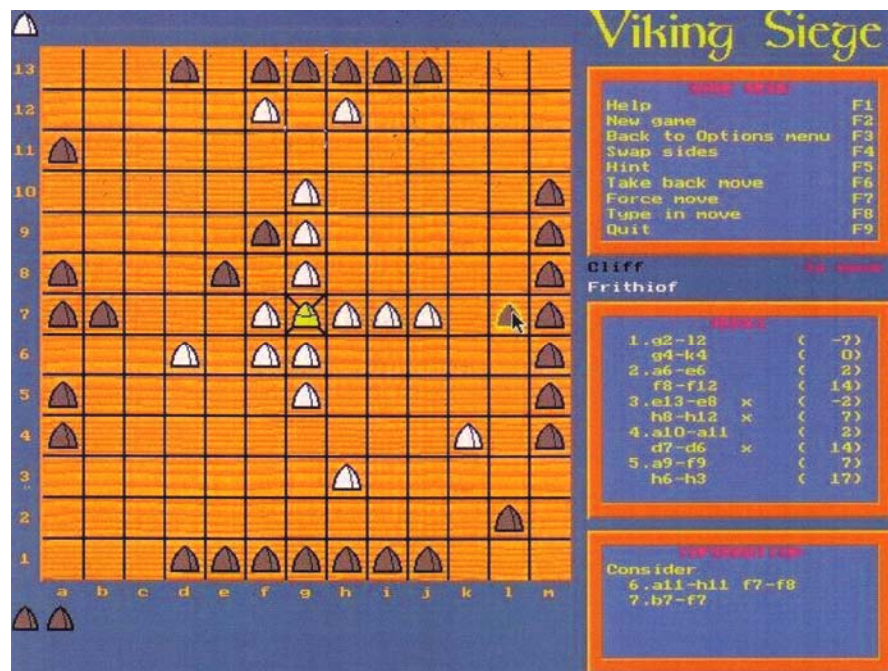
Chpt. 9, Fig. 3. The gameboard of Kings Table: *Legend of Ragnarok*.
Courtesy Imagitec Design.



Chpt. 9, Fig. 4. Challenging Geir the Godi to a game of *tafl* in Kings Table: *Legend of Ragnarok*.
Courtesy Abandonia.com.



Chpt. 9, Fig. 5. Common 9x9 modern layout of the *Hnefa-tafl* game, from Ludoteka.com.
Courtesy Ludoteka.com.



Chpt. 9, Fig. 6. *Viking Siege* by EBro Software: the attacking player is moving to block the corner sections to impede the King's escape from the centre.
Courtesy EBro Software.



Chpt. 9, Fig. 7. *Tablut Online* by Mythic Interactive.
Courtesy Mythic Interactive.



Chpt. 9, Fig. 8. Material construction of Tablut from *AGON: Ancient Games of Nations*.
Courtesy Private Moon Studios.



Chpt. 9, Fig. 9. Material construction of Tablut from *AGON: Ancient Games of Nations*.
 Courtesy Private Moon Studios.



Chpt. 9, Fig. 10. *AGON* Tablut and *Adventure in Lapland* landscape screenshots.
 Courtesy Private Moon Studios.