

HNEFATAFL (KING'S TABLE)

(nef-ah-tah'-fel)



- Ancient Norse strategy game (1600-1800 years old, 200AD-400AD), preceded chess by 600 years
- The word “Hnefi” or “Hnefa” means king in Old Norse; the word Tafl means table
- Played across northern Europe & Scotland/Ireland for centuries; old board games and pieces have been found as far as from Scotland/Ireland to the Ukraine, wherever Vikings traveled
- Part of the Tafl group of games such as Halatafl, “The Fox Game”, Freystafl, Skaktafl “Chess” Talbut and many others that originated in Northern Europe. The Celtic game Brandubh, the Welsh game Tawlbwrdd, and the Christian game Alea Evangelii “Evangelist Game” are all variations or versions of Hnefatafl
- The basic rules can be learned in 10-20 minutes. The current rule set is based on Viking customs from 1600 years ago
- The game is asymmetric, with the king and his soldiers outnumbered 2 to 1, but the king defends himself against attackers from the center of the board (high ground), and tries to escape. The role of the king is different from the role of the attackers, making it like two games in one. All pieces moved and have powers like chess rooks, and depending on the version or variation of the game, the king has certain types of special powers
- Boards could be made out of wood, textile, animal skin, carved on rocks or simply drawn on the ground. The playing pieces could be elegantly carved, or simple and crude. Hnefatafl game pieces have been found and are made in a wide range of materials, such as stone, glass, ivory, bone, antler, amber, bronze, or wood
- Most of what we know about the rules for Hnefatafl come from the few surviving Old Norse manuscripts; another source for Hnefatafl game play is an English manuscript from 925 AD documenting the rules for Alea Evangelii, a tafl game considered an ‘allegory’ for Christian beliefs, which explains the moves and starting positions of the pieces in terms of religious significance
- Chess gradually supplanted Hnefatafl in the 12th century (1100s)
- Hnefatafl has made a strong resurgence in the last 50 years across the US, Great Britain, and parts of Europe. Today there are computer ‘apps’ you can download to play online or solo against the computer

Sources:

<https://www.norseamerica.com/Hnefatafl.html>

<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/what-is-hnefatafl-viking-board-game>

<https://www.amazon.com/Hnefatafl-Viking-Game-Board/dp/B0745H2YL2>

Good to have knowledge of “both the old game with one king and the new game with two...”