

## THE VIKING GAME

### Historical Background

The Viking Game must rank as one of history's greatest board games. It was at its most popular during the Dark Ages in Northern Europe, a period of scant records and shifting populations. Like so much of the history of the Dark Ages our knowledge of the Viking Game is patchy, a mystery now half solved as a result of archaeological research.

The game was popular in the Viking homelands in Scandinavia as early as AD400 and was carried by the Vikings to the lands they conquered. Over the centuries the game developed and different versions of the board have been found by archaeologists in sites from Ireland to the Ukraine.

Occasionally referred to in manuscripts the game was known as Hnefatafl which means literally 'King's table'. The study of these manuscripts and examination of the various types of board and pieces has enabled researchers to work out how the game was probably played. There is no doubt however that many versions of the rules existed at different places and at different times.

Hnefatafl was last recorded as being played in Wales in 1587 and in Lapland in 1723. Its decline began in the 11th century as chess grew in popularity, and it soon lingered on only in remote country districts.

### About this Viking Game set

The rules we suggest below reflect how the game might have been played in the ninth or tenth century. The board incorporates typical Viking patterns in its design and is printed on natural linen, one of the few woven fabrics available to the Vikings.

Most surviving boards have been made of wood. The pieces have all been individually moulded to slightly different designs and are made in simulated wood and ivory finishes. Besides wood and ivory Viking sites have revealed jet, glass, bone and antler pieces. We have based the design of our pieces on the famous Lewis chess pieces discovered in the Outer Hebrides, an area under Viking rule at the time the pieces were made. Most Hnefatafl pieces found to date are cruder in design than this, indicating the game's popularity among ordinary people who could not afford fine things.

### How to play the Viking Game

The game is simple but subtle and is still a game on which you can easily get hooked. There are only two types of pieces, plus the warriors. All pieces make the same move.

1. The design on the board shows you how to set out the pieces. The king stands in the centre of the board on the square marked like this:



It is one of the five king's squares. His defenders, the twelve light coloured pieces, are placed around him on the squares marked:



The attacking forces of 24 dark pieces are grouped round the edge of the board on the squares marked:



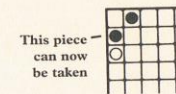
2. All pieces move the same way. It is the castle or rook's move in chess, that is, a piece can move along a row of squares vertically or horizontally but not diagonally. At each turn a piece can move as many spaces as are free but cannot jump over another piece.
3. No piece other than the king can occupy one of the king's squares though they may pass over the central square.

4. Pieces capture each other by sandwiching. This occurs when one side manages to place one piece on either side of an opponent's piece.



One of the white pieces can move in any of the directions shown by the arrows on the diagram above, in order to capture and remove the dark piece from the game. However, if the dark piece had itself moved into the gap between two players it would not be taken. The king may take part in moves to capture opponents in the same way as all other pieces but cannot himself be captured in this way.

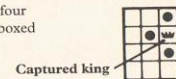
5. It is also possible to capture pieces blocking the corner squares (see right). This piece can now be taken by sandwiching the dark piece between the light piece and the corner king's square. The dark piece can then be taken.



This piece can now be taken

6. The objects of the game are for the dark side to capture the king, in which case they win, or for the king to escape to one of the king's squares in the four corners of the board, in which case the king's side wins.

7. The king is captured by boxing in on all four sides. He can also be captured by being boxed in by attackers on three sides and by his own central square on the fourth side.



Captured king

8. The attackers make the first move. Remember it is a game of attack and defence. Either side can play an aggressive or defensive game, or can suddenly switch tactics. The problems for each side are different so try playing alternate games on different sides and see who wins most games.

