

## **Linnaeus' Game of Tablut and its Relationship to the Ancient Viking Game Hnefatafl** by John C. Ashton, March 2007

### **Introduction**

In the year 1732, the young Swedish naturalist, Carolus Linnaeus, later known as Carl von Linné, the founder of taxonomy's modern nomenclature scheme, traveled to Lapland in northern Sweden on a botanical expedition. While there, he recorded in his journal, not only the plant and animal life of this substantially unexplored part of Europe, but also the human life of the native Lapps, whose habits and customs he observed firsthand. That journal of his travels was published as *Iter Lapponicum* in 1732, containing entries in Swedish interspersed with sections in Latin. The book was not published in English translation until 1811, as *Lachesis Lapponica*.

One journal entry of considerable cultural, historical, and archaeological significance, partially translated by J. E. Smith, was largely overlooked until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The British game historian H. J. R. Murray was the first to identify the importance of Linnaeus' description of the rules of a Lapp game called Tablut. This game, he argued, was related to, and possibly identical with, an ancient Viking game called Hnefatafl, which the Icelandic sagas frequently reference. The game involves a defending force composed of a king and his warriors, located at the center of the playing board, besieged by a much larger attacking force, positioned at the periphery of the board. The Hnefatafl family of games was very popular in northern Europe until the introduction of chess, which ultimately displaced it except in "backwaters" like Lapland.

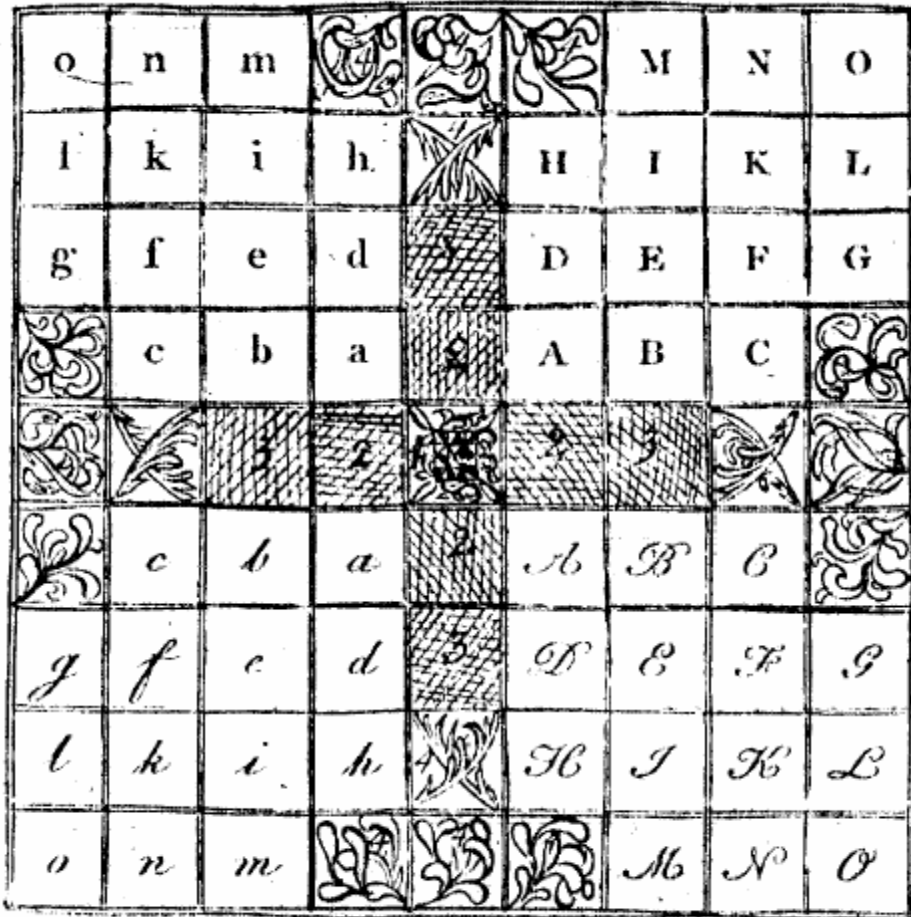
Unfortunately, the original English translation of Linnaeus' diary account of Tablut omitted 2 of the 14 entries, and those that were translated were of dubious accuracy in a few cases. Murray based his reconstruction of the rules on this faulty English translation; furthermore, his set of rules overlooked some of the nuances suggested by Linnaeus' observations. Part of the problem was that Linnaeus did not speak the Lapp language, and so had to arrive at an understanding of the game by induction, presenting examples of permissible moves for the pieces. Another part of the problem was that Linnaeus' use of Latin contained cryptic abbreviations and various errors of syntax that made translation difficult. A final part of the problem was that these errors were compounded as Murray used Smith's translation, and subsequent game historians used Murray.

Attempts to play Tablut or other Hnefatafl games with Murray's rules show that the game is extremely unbalanced; the defending force is greatly favored and almost always wins. This is primarily due to the incorrect assumption that the king must be captured by surrounding him in 4 cardinal directions. Attempts to weaken the king to help balance the game, proffered by other game historians, have included a weaponless king, who may not assist his men in capturing opposing pieces. In fact, this article grew out of the attempt to locate literary evidence to support such an unarmed king rule (e.g., a disputed passage from the Icelandic *Hervarar* saga).

However, a new translation of Linnaeus' Latin text has resolved the mystery. Essentially, the solution lies in a 2-man rather than 4-man capture rule for the king (with certain exceptions). The Danish archaeological magazine *Skalk* appears to have arrived at a similar conclusion, judging from the rules contained in their reconstruction of Hnefatafl. This, though, is the first time that an accurate set of rules for the variant Tablut, and by extension Hnefatafl (assuming they were nearly identical, as archaeological finds suggest), is being offered to English speakers.

Rules translated from Latin, clarified, and expanded by John C. Ashton, March 2007.  
 Professional Latin translation performed at Lengu.com for verification purposes, March 2007.

**Tablut** (a late Swedish variant of Hnefatafl, exported to Lapland and observed by Linnaeus)



*Starting Positions.*

1. *Royal Citadel* (or throne). Called *Konokis* in Lapp, no one is allowed to enter this central space. The Swedish King is placed here to start the game.
  - 2 & 3. Swedes number 9 when counted together with their King; at the beginning of the game, their 8 soldiers are arranged around the King in squares 2 and 3.
  4. Muscovites are placed in the 16 perimeter embroidered squares at the start of the game, some of which have the notation 4 in the figure.
- Other.* Empty spaces can be occupied by any piece legally, including the King; this applies for all prominently lettered (*a* through *o*, *A* through *O*) and prominently numbered (2, 3) spaces. Other spaces (i.e., embroidered squares, including 1 and 4) are citadels and are off-limits to all pieces. A piece originating in a citadel may not re-enter once it has left.

*Laws.*

1. All pieces can occupy and move to a space by means of a straight line, not obliquely, as *a* to *c* not as *a* to *e*.
2. It is not permitted to go to a space by means of a straight line if it would require jumping another occupied space, as from *b* to *m*, if in the process *i* is occupied.
3. If the King, for example, occupies space *b* and no one is in *e*, *i* and *m*, he can leave, as long as a Muscovite does not block or capture the King in the next turn.
4. If the King can escape to a perimeter square (except for the off-limits embroidered squares), the game is over.
5. If the King, for example, is positioned in *e*, and neither his own nor hostile soldiers are in *f* and *g* or *i* and *m*, his escape cannot be stopped, unless he is captured in the next move.
6. If the King sees a clear escape route, he calls out *Raichi* (check); if two open routes exist, he calls out *Tuicha* (checkmate).
7. It is permissible to move as far as possible along a straight line, as from *c* to *n*, if nothing is blocking.
8. Swedes and Muscovites move in alternate turns. The lighter color pieces (usually the Swedes) are arbitrarily allowed to move first [this is not specified in Linnaeus].
9. If 1 piece finds itself trapped between 2 enemies, it is captured and must be removed from the board. This is also true for the King, except as noted in rules 10 and 11 below. It is permissible to move in between two enemy pieces already in position; a soldier is only taken if a sandwiching (hammer and anvil) movement is made by his enemy. The hammer and anvil enemy pieces must be lined up either vertically or horizontally with the soldier who is captured; diagonal captures are not allowed. Multiple captures of 2 or even 3 enemy pieces are possible with a single move (given favorable geometry).
10. If the King is in citadel *I* and enemies in 3 of the places numbered 2, he can escape to the fourth square labeled 2. If his own man is occupying the 4<sup>th</sup> square, and if that soldier in 2 is positioned between the King and an enemy soldier, it is killed. If four enemies are in 2, the King is captured. Four attackers are required to take the King, as described above, only when he is on his throne (citadel *I*). The Swede in square 2 is captured, as described above, not because he is trapped between the King and a Muscovite, but rather because he is trapped between the throne and a Muscovite; see rule 14 below regarding citadels.
11. If the King is in 2, and 3 enemies are in *a*, *A* and 3, he is captured. It is only when the king is directly adjacent to the throne (in square 2) that 3 attackers are required to take him. Unless the King is on or next to the throne, he may be captured like any other piece.
12. The King being thus captured or hemmed in finishes the battle and the victor retains the Swedes he captured, claims the defeated Muscovites, and a new game can start, if so desired.
13. Muscovites operate without a king, being 16 soldiers divided into 4 ordered phalanxes.
14. A citadel can block, just as a third piece would, so that if a soldier is in 2 and an enemy in 3, he is killed. Thus, a piece may not move through a citadel (embroidered squares *I* or *4*), and if standing next to one of these hostile squares, a piece may be captured with the hammer movement of a single opponent (except for the King standing next to the throne).
15. A draw should result if a series of moves is repeated 3 times. To avoid this, and to avoid an endless game, the offensive player (whose next move would initiate the third in the series of repeated moves), must find an alternative move, either with the piece he had been moving, or with some other piece. [Rule not in Linnaeus, but added for playability.]

**Hnefatafl** (the original Viking game, reconstructed based on Tablut rules recorded by Linnaeus)

Tablut is a medieval Swedish variant of the ancient Viking game Hnefatafl. It is important to realize that the strategic situation for the Swedes had changed between the earlier Viking and later medieval ages. In Tablut, the Swedish throne probably represented one of the fortified castles the Swedes built along the river entrances to the Baltic coast, and the Muscovite base camps probably represented neighboring fortresses from which the Russians laid siege to the Swedish outposts. In Hnefatafl, the Viking King in his central fortress is besieged by another Viking tribe. The raiders have no permanent base camps, but rather arrive and leave in their famous longships. To escape this attack, the King's goal is to reach one of the four corners squares, which are fortified citadels at the outskirts of his territory that will offer him protection. Thus, all of the above Tablut rules may be used to play Hnefatafl, with the following exceptions.

1. Instead of Swedes, the smaller force is called the Defenders, and instead of Muscovites, the larger force is called the Attackers.
2. Usually, the Attackers are the light colored pieces (at least according to the Icelandic sagas). So, if white is arbitrarily assigned the first move, the Attackers would typically have the first move in the game (logically, being the aggressors).
3. As explained above, there are only five squares or citadels that have special properties (the center throne and four corner citadels). Once the King has left his throne, he cannot return, just as in Tablut, and the throne cannot be landed on or moved through by anyone.
4. Only the King is allowed to enter the four corner citadels, at which point he wins the game. His goal here is to reach a corner citadel, not, as in Tablut, just any legal perimeter square. The 16 squares where the Attackers originate have no special properties and may be moved through and landed on legally by all pieces.
5. The corner citadels, like the throne, are hostile to other pieces and may be used to capture them. The throne thus can serve as one of the four opponents necessary to capture the King when he is adjacent to his throne, and a corner citadel can serve as one of the two opponents necessary to capture the King when he is away from his throne. If the King is captured, of course, the Attackers win the game.


























Note that Hnefatafl came in various board sizes besides 9x9, such as 7x7, 11x11, 13x13 and 19x19. Different boards were popular in different geographical regions under Viking influence, and were known locally by different names. The above Hnefatafl rules may be used for all these versions, the only difference being the quantities and exact starting positions of the pieces. These rules should result in a playable and balanced game, unlike many modern reconstructions. In all boards, the ratio of Attackers to Defenders (not counting the King) was 2:1. Also, in all versions, the King started at the central throne, encompassed by his Defenders, all of whom were encircled by Attackers, positioned at or near the perimeter of the board. The precise starting positions of the pieces are really only known for Tablut (and thus its 9x9 Hnefatafl cousin, which was probably played throughout Scandinavia) and the Anglo-Saxon Alea Evangelii (19x19). Other speculative setups have been proposed by historians for the remaining board sizes (Irish 7x7 Brandubh, Welsh 11x11 Tawl-bwrdd, and Scandinavian 11x11 and 13x13 variants), based partly on Irish and Welsh literary sources that suggest the piece counts for the 7x7 and 11x11 boards. These proposed starting positions are available in a number of references (and online).

Derivation of Results: Step 1 in the Process – Linnaeus’ Original Latin Manuscript

*Iter Lapponicum*, Carolus Linnaeus, 1732, p. 147-148

Rules as observed by Linnaeus in Lapland, recorded in Latin for his journal. Latin text follows.

*Tablut.*

o	n	m				M	N	O
i	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

1. *Arx regia. Konokis Lappon., cui nullus succedere potest.*
- 2 et 3. *Sveci N:r 9 cum rege et eorum loca s. stationes.*
4. *Muscovitarum stationes omnes in prima aggressionem depictae.*
- O. *Vacua loca occupare cuique licitum, item Regi, idem valet de locis characterisatis praeter arcem.*

### *Leges.*

1. Alla få occupera och mutare loca per lineam rectam, non vero transversam, ut *a* ad *c* non vero *a* ad *e*. [First portion of sentence is in Swedish.]
2. Nulli licitum sit locum per lineam rectam alium supersalire, occupare, ut a *b* ad *m*, alio aliquo in *i* constituto.
3. Si Rex occuparet locum *b* et nullus in *e*, *i* et *m* positus esset, posit exire, nisi mox muscovite aliquod ex locis nominates occupat, et Regi exitum praecludit.
4. Si Rex tali modo exit, est praelium fiutum.
5. Si Rex in *e* collocaretur, nec ullus s. ejus s. hostis miles esset in *f g* sive *i m*, tum aditus non potest claudi.
6. Ut Rex aditum apertum vidit, clamet *Raichi*, si duae viae apertae sunt *tuicha*.
7. Licitum est loca dissita occupare per lineam rectam, ut a *c* ad *n*, nullo intercludente.
8. Svecus et muscovite in gressibus alternant.
9. Si quis hostem 1 inter 2 sibi hostes collocare posit, est occisus et ejici debet, item Rex.
10. Si Rex in arce *1* et hostes in 3<sup>bus</sup> ex N:r 2, tum abire potest per quartum, et si ejus in 4<sup>to</sup> locum occupare potest, si ita cinetus et miles in 2 collocatur, est inter regem et militem qvi stat occisus, si qvatuor hostes in 2, tum rex captus est.
11. Si Rex in 2, tum hostes 3, sc. in *a a* et 3 erint, si capiatur.
12. Rege capto vel intercluso finitur bellum et victor retinet svecos, devictus muscovitas et ludus incipiatur.
13. Muscovitae sine rege erint, suntque 16 in 4 phalangibus disponendis.
14. Arx potest intercludere, aequae ac trio, ut si miles in 2 et hostis in 3 est, occidat.

### Author's Note

There is some ambiguity in these rules, even when properly translated into English. Consequently, the following alternate rule is suggested for the interested gamer. It may or may not lead to a more playable game, but there is not enough evidence in Linnaeus' journal to completely discount it. The initial interpretations of such ambiguous rules are found in the primary Tablut rules presented above. Obviously, the alternate rule would supersede that, and can be considered applicable to both Tablut and Hnefatafl. The numbering of the modified rules presented here is consistent with Linnaeus' Laws as described elsewhere.

14. A citadel can block, just as a third piece would, so that if a soldier is in 2 and an enemy in 3, he is killed. Thus, a piece may not land on a citadel (embroidered squares 1 or 4). However, a piece may move through an empty citadel (throne and, in Tablut, base camp). If standing next to one of these empty hostile squares, a piece may be captured with the hammer movement of a single opponent (except for the King standing next to the throne). A citadel is not hostile unless empty, except as described in rule 10, where a Swede in square 2 is captured by being trapped between a Muscovite in square 3 and the King in citadel 1, himself surrounded by Muscovites in the other 3 squares labeled 2. The reason for this special clause in rule 10 is to avoid stalemate, with the King nearly surrounded by Muscovites, but for one Swede in square 2 prolonging the game indefinitely.