



TAFL

VARIANT LIBRARY

King against the horde: asymmetric Norse strategy games of the Viking Age

4

VARIANTS

2

PLAYERS

8+

AGE

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VARIANT LIBRARY

Tafl (Old Norse: “table”) is a family of asymmetric board games played across Norse and Celtic Northern Europe from around 400 AD until chess displaced them in the 11th and 12th century. One player commands a king and a small defending force trying to reach safety; the other controls a larger attacking force trying to capture the king. Tablut (9×9) is the only variant recorded from living practice, documented by Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus during his 1732 Lapland expedition. All other variants in this hub are historical reconstructions from medieval texts and archaeological finds. Every variant is pre-1800 in origin and in the public domain.

This library includes 4 playable variants.

- ♦ [Tablut](#) — 9×9; the only form observed from living practice (Linnaeus 1732); King escapes to any board edge
- ♦ [Brandubh](#) — 7×7 Irish form; 4 defenders and 8 attackers; King escapes to corner squares
- ♦ [Hnefatafl](#) — 11×11; the primary Norse form, reconstructed from Tablut and archaeological evidence; King escapes to corner squares
- ♦ [Tawlbwrdd](#) — 11×11 Welsh form documented in a 1587 manuscript; King escapes to any edge square

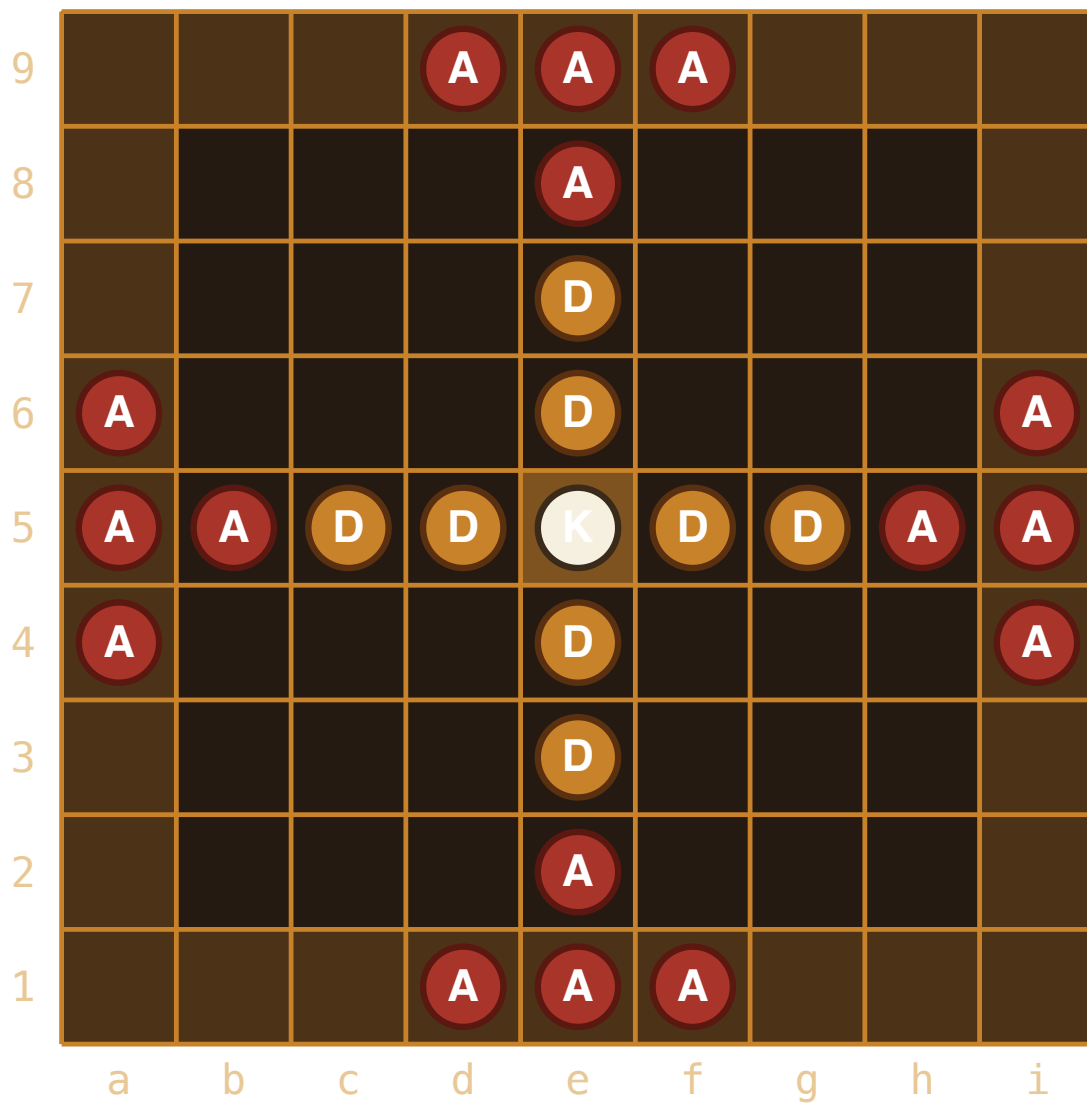


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TAFI · VARIANT 1 OF 4

Tablut



Tablut — starting position

<https://engine.moddable.games/play/?game=tafl&variant=standard>

OVERVIEW

Tablut is the most reliably sourced variant in the tafl family, recorded by Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus during his 1732 Lapland expedition among the Sami people and published in *Lachesis Lapponica* (English translation 1811). A corrected translation was produced in 2013 by Finnish linguist Olli Salmi. Tablut is the only tafl variant documented from living practice; all other variants in this hub are historical reconstructions.

COMPONENTS

Board: 9×9 squares. The central square (e5) is the castle, also called the throne (*konakis* in Sami). No piece may land on the throne once vacated, including the King.

Pieces:

- ♦ Swedish (defenders): 1 King + 8 defenders (light)
 - ♦ Muscovite (attackers): 16 attackers (dark)
-

STARTING POSITION

- ♦ King: e5 (centre)
 - ♦ Defenders (8): c5, d5, f5, g5 (horizontal arm); e3, e4, e6, e7 (vertical arm)
 - ♦ Attackers (16): d1, e1, f1, e2 (south); d9, e9, f9, e8 (north); a4, a5, a6, b5 (west); i4, i5, i6, h5 (east)
-

Muscovite attackers move first.

MOVEMENT

All pieces move any number of empty squares orthogonally, in the manner of a rook in chess. No piece may jump another. No diagonal movement.

THRONE SQUARE

The throne counts as a hostile square for custodial captures against any piece. No piece may land on the throne once the King has vacated it, including the King himself.

CAPTURE

A piece is captured by custodial capture: sandwiched orthogonally between two enemy pieces, or between one enemy piece and the empty throne square. A piece that moves voluntarily between two enemies is not captured; the trap must be closed by the moving piece. The King may participate in captures.

KING CAPTURE

The King is captured when surrounded on all four orthogonal sides by attackers. If the King is adjacent to the empty throne, three attackers suffice (the throne counts as the fourth side).

WIN CONDITIONS

- ♦ **Defenders win** if the King reaches any square on the board edge.
- ♦ **Attackers win** if the King is captured.
- ♦ **Draw** if neither player can achieve their objective.

SPECIAL TERMS

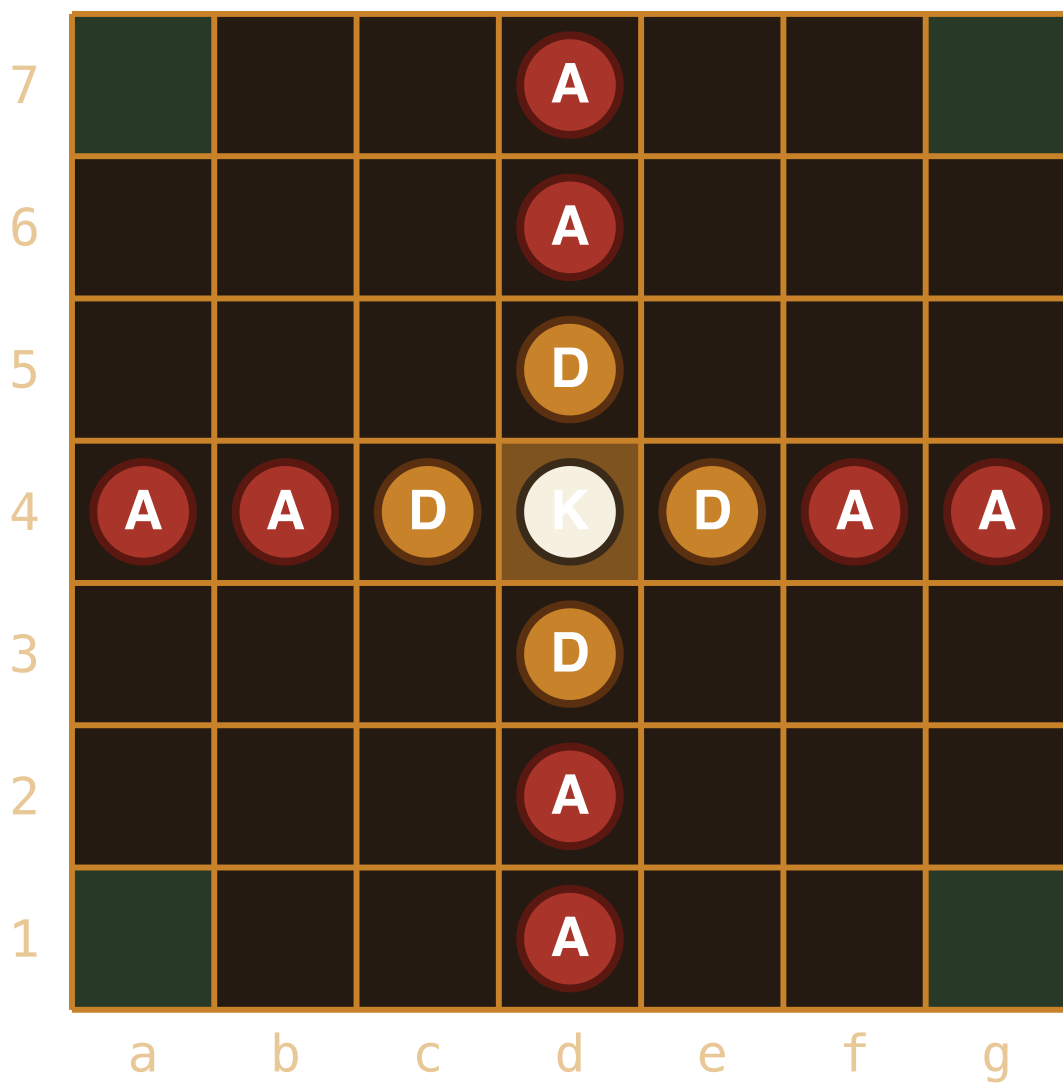
When the King has one escape route to the board edge, the defending player announces *raichi*. When the King has two such routes, the call is *tuichu*. These are modern additions, likely borrowed from chess.

HISTORICAL NOTE

Linnaeus witnessed Tablut being played by Sami people in Lapland in 1732. The original diary entry was first translated to English in 1811 (*Lachesis Lapponica*). The Salmi corrected translation (2013, updated 2015) addresses transcription errors in the earlier version and forms the basis of the most widely used tournament ruleset. Under the Salmi ruleset, the Muscovite (attacking) side wins approximately 60% of games.

TAFI · VARIANT 2 OF 4

Brandubh



Brandubh — starting position

<https://engine.moddable.games/play/?game=tafl&variant=brandubh>

OVERVIEW

Brandubh (Irish: “black raven”) is the Irish form of tafl, played on a 7×7 board. The game is mentioned in several medieval Irish texts. The rules here follow the reconstruction by H.J.R. Murray (*A History of Board Games*, 1951: 35) as formalised by the Ludii Project (Maastricht University). All tafl variants other than Tablut are historical reconstructions; no original complete ruleset survives.

COMPONENTS

Board: 7×7 squares. The central square (d4) is restricted: no piece may land on it. The four corner squares (a1, a7, g1, g7) are restricted: only the King may enter them. Both the central square and all corner squares are hostile to all pieces for capture purposes.

Pieces:

- ♦ Defenders: 1 King + 4 defenders (light)
 - ♦ Attackers: 8 attackers (dark)
-

STARTING POSITION

Attackers move first.

- ♦ King: d4 (centre)
 - ♦ Defenders (4): c4, e4 (horizontal); d3, d5 (vertical)
 - ♦ Attackers (8): a4, b4 (west arm); f4, g4 (east arm); d1, d2 (south arm); d6, d7 (north arm)
-

MOVEMENT

All pieces move any distance orthogonally. No piece may land on the central square. Only the King may enter corner squares.

CAPTURE

A piece is captured when surrounded orthogonally on two sides by opposing pieces. Pieces may also be captured between the central square and an opposing piece, or between a corner square and an opposing piece.

KING CAPTURE

- ♦ King on the central square: must be surrounded on all four orthogonal sides.
- ♦ King adjacent to the central square: surrounded on three sides (the central square counts as the fourth).
- ♦ King elsewhere: captured as any other piece.

WIN CONDITIONS

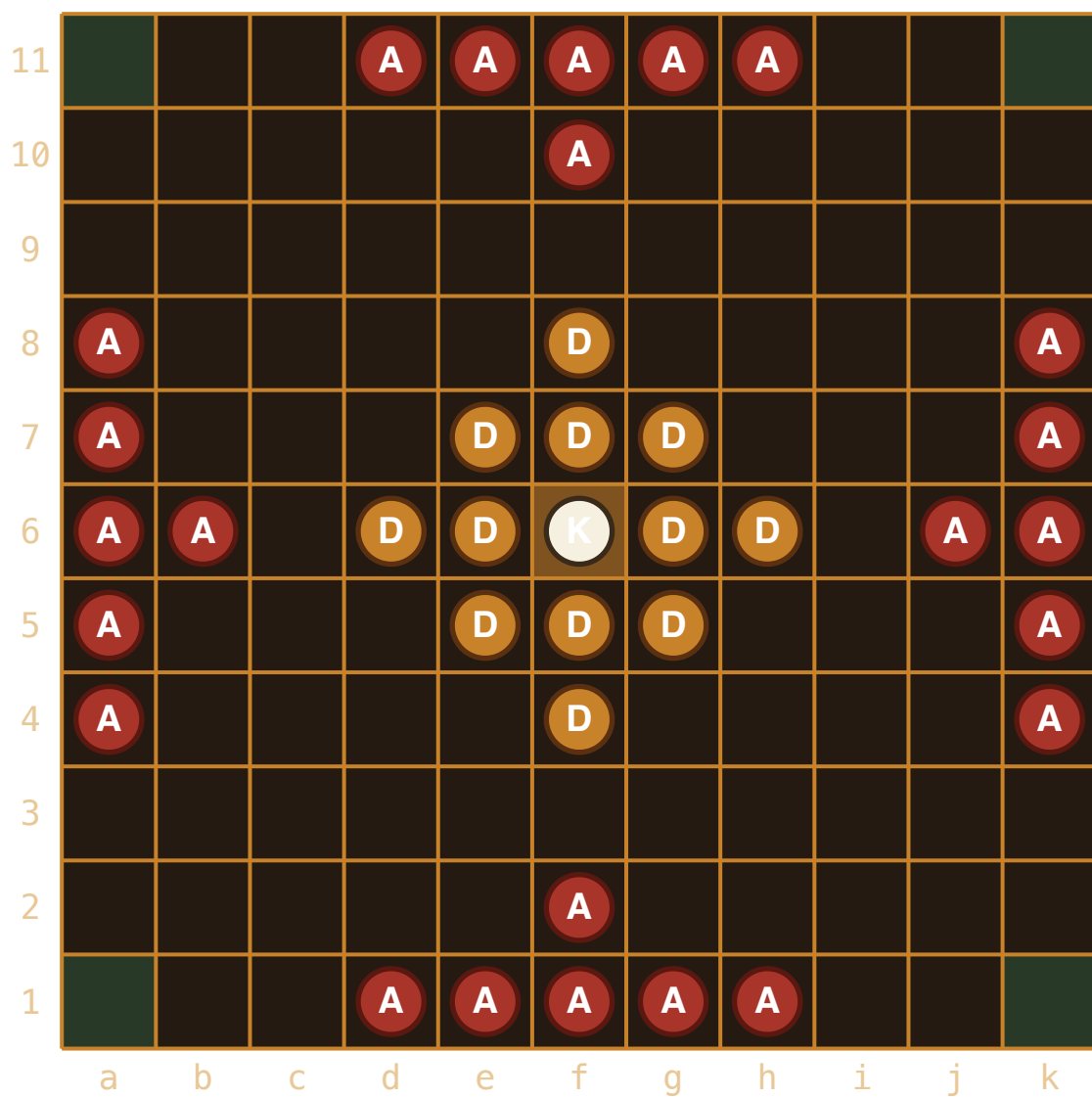
- ♦ **Defenders win** if the King reaches any corner square.
- ♦ **Attackers win** if the King is captured.

HISTORICAL NOTE

“Brandubh” appears in several medieval Irish texts in connection with kingship and conflict. The precise historical form of the game is uncertain. This implementation follows the Murray reconstruction as formalised by the Ludii Project, with cynningstan.com (Damian Walker) as the primary reconstructor. As with all non-Tablut tafl variants, these rules represent scholarly consensus rather than a verbatim historical source.

TAFL · VARIANT 3 OF 4

Hnefatafl



Hnefatafl — starting position

<https://engine.moddable.games/play/?game=tafl&variant=hnefatafl>

OVERVIEW

Hnefatafl (Old Norse: “king’s table”) is the primary form of the tafl family, played across Norse and Celtic Northern Europe from around 400 AD. No original written rules survive. All rules are reconstructed from Tablut (Linnaeus 1732) extrapolated to an 11×11 board, from archaeological game sets, and from saga references. This variant follows the Historical Hnefatafl rules documented by Aage Nielsen (aagenielsen.dk, 2016). The Copenhagen rules (2012), which add shield wall mechanics, are a modern tournament variant and are not included here.

COMPONENTS

Board: 11×11 squares. The central square (f6) is the throne: restricted to all except the King, though all pieces may pass through it when empty. The four corner squares (a1, k1, a11, k11) are restricted: only the King may enter them.

Pieces:

- ♦ Defenders: 1 King + 12 defenders (light)
 - ♦ Attackers: 24 attackers (dark)
-

STARTING POSITION

Attackers move first.

- ♦ King: f6 (centre)
 - ♦ Defenders (12): d6, e6, g6, h6 (horizontal arm); f4, f5, f7, f8 (vertical arm); e5, g5, e7, g7 (flanking squares)
 - ♦ Attackers (24): d1, e1, f1, g1, h1, f2 (south); d11, e11, f11, g11, h11, f10 (north); a4, a5, a6, a7, a8, b6 (west); k4, k5, k6, k7, k8, j6 (east)
-

MOVEMENT

All pieces move any number of empty squares orthogonally. No jumping. Only the King may occupy the throne or corner squares; all pieces may pass through the empty throne.

RESTRICTED SQUARES

The throne is always hostile to attackers. The throne is hostile to defenders only when empty. Corner squares are always hostile to both sides. A hostile square counts as an enemy piece for capture purposes.

CAPTURE

A piece is captured when sandwiched orthogonally between two enemy pieces, or between one enemy piece and a hostile square.

KING CAPTURE

- ♦ King on the throne: surrounded on all four sides by attackers.
- ♦ King adjacent to the throne: surrounded on three sides (the throne counts as the fourth).
- ♦ King elsewhere: sandwiched between two enemies, or between one enemy and a hostile square.

WIN CONDITIONS

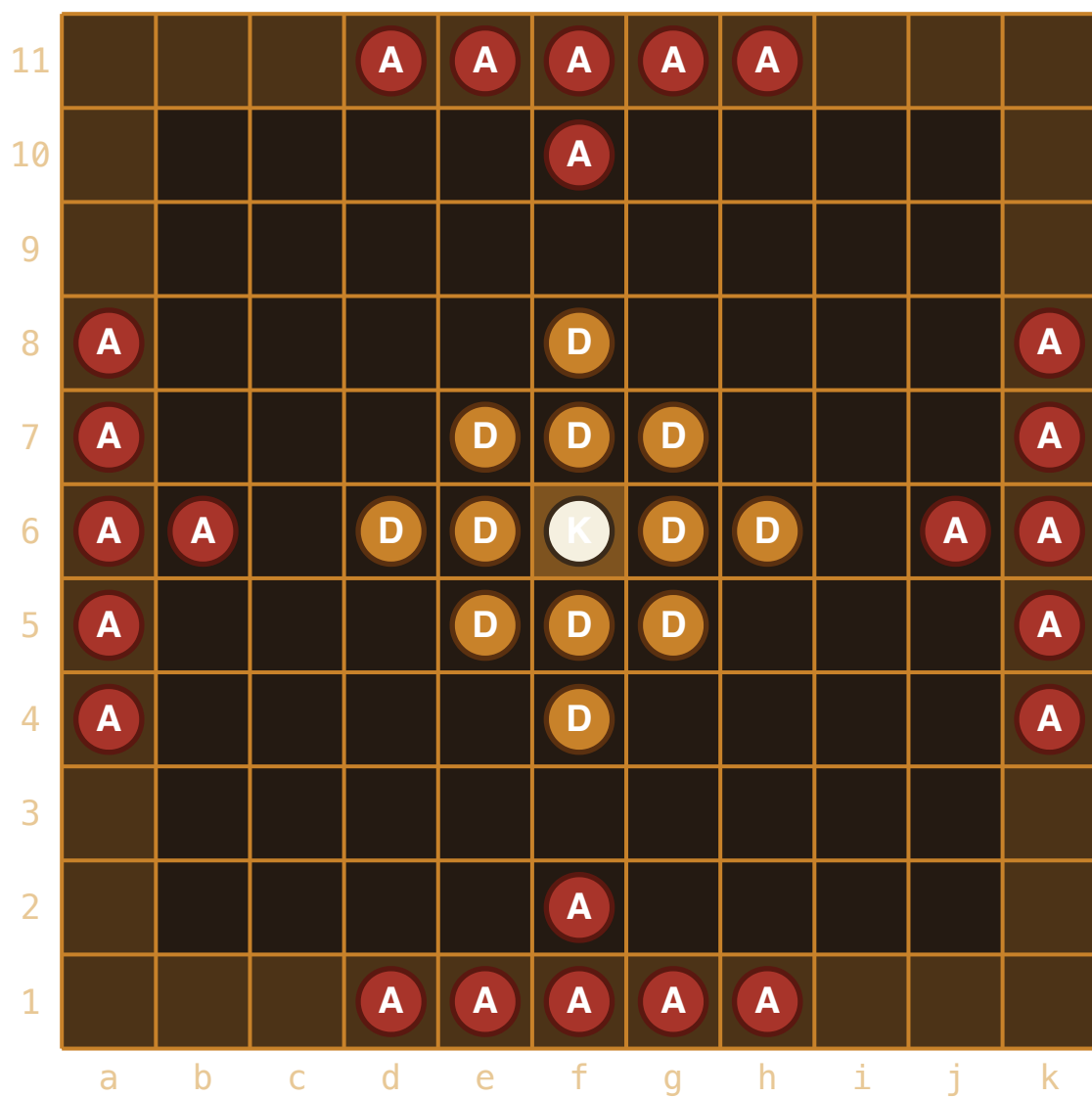
- ♦ **Defenders win** if the King reaches any corner square.
- ♦ **Attackers win** if the King is captured.
- ♦ **Draw** by perpetual repetition, or if neither side can achieve their objective.

HISTORICAL NOTE

No original written rules for Hnefatafl survive. The game is known from archaeological finds, saga references in Old Norse literature, and extrapolation of the Tablut rules recorded by Linnaeus in 1732. The reconstruction presented here follows Aage Nielsen's Historical Hnefatafl rules. As with all non-Tablut tafl variants, these rules represent current scholarly consensus rather than a verbatim historical source.

TAFI · VARIANT 4 OF 4

Tawlbwrdd



Tawlbwrdd — starting position

<https://engine.moddable.games/play/?game=tafl&variant=tawlbwrdd>

OVERVIEW

Tawlbwrdd is the Welsh form of tafl, documented in Peniarth Manuscript 158, a 1587 Welsh manuscript. The manuscript specifies piece counts and describes some aspects of movement and capture, but leaves the full ruleset incomplete. All movement and win rules are modern reconstructions. This variant follows Damian Walker's reconstruction (cyclingstan.com) as formalised by the Ludii Project (Maastricht University). All tafl variants other than Tablut are historical reconstructions.

COMPONENTS

Board: 11×11 squares. The central square (f6) is the throne. The King wins by reaching any edge square (in contrast to Hnefatafl, where only corner squares win).

Pieces:

- ♦ Defenders: 1 King + 12 defenders (light)
 - ♦ Attackers: 24 attackers (dark)
-

STARTING POSITION

Attackers move first.

- ♦ King: f6 (centre)
 - ♦ Defenders (12): d6, e6, g6, h6 (horizontal); f4, f5, f7, f8 (vertical); e5, g5, e7, g7 (flanking)
 - ♦ Attackers (24): six per edge, central five squares of each outer edge plus one in front: d1, e1, f1, g1, h1, f2 (south); d11, e11, f11, g11, h11, f10 (north); a4, a5, a6, a7, a8, b6 (west); k4, k5, k6, k7, k8, j6 (east)
-

MOVEMENT

All pieces move orthogonally any number of spaces. No jumping. Attackers move first.

CAPTURE

A piece is captured by surrounding it on two opposite sides by an opponent's piece. Two or three pieces in a line may be captured at once by surrounding them in this way. An entire row of pieces cannot be captured.

WIN CONDITIONS

- ♦ **Defenders win** if the King reaches any square on the board edge.
 - ♦ **Attackers win** if the King is captured.
-

HISTORICAL NOTE

Tawlbwrdd is documented in Peniarth Manuscript 158 (1587). The manuscript names the game and states that one side plays with a king and twelve men, the other with twenty-four. Movement and win conditions are reconstructed. The edge-escape win condition (King reaches any edge square) follows the Cyningstan reconstruction formalised by the Ludii Project, and distinguishes Tawlbwrdd from Hnefatafl, where the King must reach a corner. As with all non-Tablut tafl variants, this file represents scholarly reconstruction rather than a primary historical transcription.