

A wooden game board with a grid of squares, some of which are filled with a dark material. The board is made of light-colored wood and is placed on a wooden surface. The grid is composed of dark lines. There are several pieces on the board, some of which are dark and some are light. The pieces are arranged in a way that suggests a game in progress. The text "Norse Style Game Board" is overlaid on the image in a large, bold, black font.

# Norse Style Game Board

Made by Rachel Edwards

For Robyn of Rye



# What is it ?

This is a two sided game board, one side has a Tablut grid and the other has a 9 men's morris board.

I tried to create a gameboard that pays homage to remains of one found in the Gokstad burial. The boat and everything in it was built around 850 AD and buried sometime around 890 AD at the Gokstad farm in Sandefjord, Vestfold, Norway. ( Source 1)

This ancient board is a double sided board with 9 men's morris on one side and a 13 square grid on the other which is assumed to be a Tablut style game board since it is the right size and shape and no other known games from that era match.

The game pieces that have been found from this time period are typically made of horn, bone, or glass. The Gokstad board had playing pieces made of horn.



# How was it made ?

In period, these kinds of game boards were often made of oak. They were cut and carved using nothing but the hand tools of the time. Saws, chisels, rasps and gauges have all been found in archeological discoveries from the period so it is safe to assume that those were the types of tools used.

The carving on the Gokstad board is quite intricate, most likely done by fine carving knives.

I used power tools to cut and sand my board. The game board is made of a piece of artisanally cut lumber so the playing surfaces are not entirely flat. I chose to leave these imperfections rather than sand them out as I felt that they gave the board more character.

I am not very experienced at woodcarving and the proper tools to recreate the Gokstad board are quite a ways out of my budget so I had to find an alternative method to decorate the wood.

I attempted to carve the wood with a dremel powertool but I was horribly dissatisfied with the results.

Finally I decided to buy myself a pyrography iron and carve the wood with fire. Pyrography is a decorative art form which exists since the day when ancient mankind realized that the charred wood in their fire could be made decorative.



I have yet to find evidence of pyrography from ancient Norse culture but this is to be expected. The majority of wooden finds from that ancient time have lost all varnish and paint over the ages. The carving remains, but it is quite possible that the soot from woodburning could have worn away with the varnish. From my experience of making this game board, I know just how challenging it is to keep the soot on the project and off of my hands or workspace.

Given the skill and artistry of the ancient Norse woodcarvers, I decided to take artistic license and do my carving with pyrography as I, personally, feel that it is such an obvious choice that my Scandinavian ancestors must have used it from time to time to add color as well as depth to their fantastic carvings.

I made the decision to change the grid for the Tablut side of the board. There are many versions of Tablut that people have researched over the years but the rules of play for the 13 square board found in the Gokstad burial have yet to be fully understood. I wanted to make a game that my recipient could play right away.

The basic version of Tablut is played on a 9x9 grid, and I felt that I could more comfortably fit 9 squares on my board than 13.

As for the decoration of the board, I attempted to include Viking style knotwork wherever possible, including my recipient's sigil of Odin's wolves chasing one another around the edge of the board and Robyn's name in viking runes at the center of the 9 men's morris board.

I had a hard time deciding how to make the pieces for this game board.

Originally I wanted to make them out of bone but couldn't find a source for small enough bones.

I was prepared to harvest some branches off of a backyard tree and cut them to size for the pieces but when I went to the store that morning I found some little bits of wood for sale that were already cut and sanded.

I decided that I could forego my need to make everything by myself just this once as my project was already quite a bit overdue.

I used the woodburner to decorate two sets of disks for the Swedes and the Muscovites and I used some simple wood glue to assemble the king before carving him.

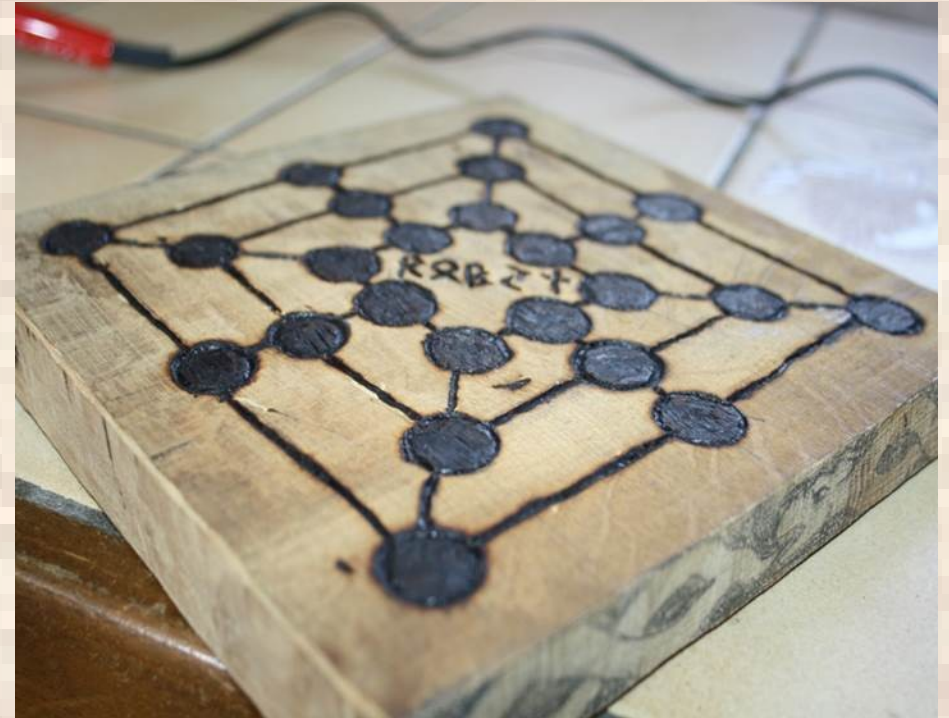
The board and all of my pieces were coated with a thin layer of varnish to prevent the decoration from rubbing away. I found it interesting to learn that while the vikings likely used varnish on their items, very little of it has ever been found as it tends to wear away over time. I'm sure they didn't use polyurethane varnish but I didn't have the time to hunt for beetles to grind up.

The final conundrum I had was how to ship the pieces. I tried taping several toilet paper rolls together as a mailing tube but it just looked far too amateur. Then, I remembered that in my stash of fabric I had a felted wool pouch that I had made for myself some 6 or 7 years ago and which I have never used. I was so happy to think that my pouch will actually be used for something ! I quickly pierced some holes with an awl, threaded a piece of braid through them and sent the whole thing off to my partner.

# Progress Photos



The majority of the Tablut board is finished. In this photo you can see the sketched knotwork for the Muskovite base camps.



This photo was taken right after I'd finished the Morris board. You can see the sketched wolves on the edge, ready to carve.



# Progress Photos



The finished board drying after I had varnished it.



The three types of game pieces.

(Left to Right)

The Muscovites

The Swedish King (Hnefi)

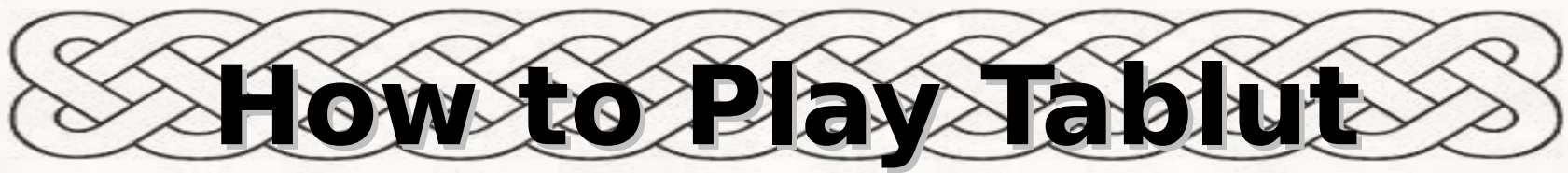
The Swedish Knights (Drabants)



# How to Set Up for Tablut







# How to Play Tablut

Tablut is an ancient game, similar to chess, in which a small army must defend their king against a large attacking force.

Tablut goes by several names, Tafl, Hfentafl, etc. However, the grid that I chose to reconstruct is most often considered to be the typical Tablut board.

There are four types of squares on this board. The carved center square is the throne (or Konakis). Close to it are the defender squares (colored black on your board.)

In the middle of each side is a set of four squares connected with knotwork. These are called the Muscovite base camp.

All of the unpatterned squares are free to travel upon.

The goal of the Swedes is to move their king off of the board.

The goal of the Muscovites is to capture the king.

# Rules of Tablut

- All pieces move like rooks in chess. As many vacant squares as desired either horizontally or vertically.
- A capture is made by moving one of your men to trap the soldier between two of your pieces. A piece may move safely between two enemy pieces. The king is captured by trapping him on all four sides or on 3 sides with his 4<sup>th</sup> blocked by the throne.
- The throne belongs to the king only. No other pieces may pass through (Swede nor Muscovite) and the King may NOT take part in captures.
- When the king has one escape route clear, the Swede player must say "raicki" (the equivalent of check), when the king has two escape routes, the Swede player must say "tuicku" which is the equivalent of checkmate.

The majority of the rules which exist for Tablut are optional. They allow you to adjust the balance of the game so that neither side has an unfair advantage. Here are some of the optional rules.

- The muscovites can move within their base camps but once they leave it, they cannot return.
- The king may not escape through the muscovite base camps.
- There are many more optional rules listed in the sources that I have referenced.



# How to Play 9 Men's Morris







# How to Play 9 Men's Morris

Each player starts with 9 pieces or 'men'. For 9 men's morris, the diagonal lines do not count !  
(These are there for variations on the game.)

Players try to form 'mills', a row or column of 3 pieces. When you form a mill you have the right to remove one of your opponant's pieces from the board.


The game is played in three parts.

- Part One : Placing pieces
  - The game begins with an empty board. The players determine who plays first, then take turns placing their men one per play on empty points. If a player is able to place three of his pieces in a straight line, vertically or horizontally, he has formed a mill and may remove one of his opponent's pieces from the board and the game. Any piece can be chosen for the removal, but a piece not in an opponent's mill must be selected, if possible



# How to Play 9 Men's Morris

- Part Two : Moving Pieces
  - Players continue to alternate moves, this time moving a man to an adjacent point. A piece may not "jump" another piece. Players continue to try to form mills and remove their opponent's pieces in the same manner as in phase one. A player may "break" a mill by moving one of his pieces out of an existing mill, then moving the piece back to form the same mill a second time (or any number of times), each time removing one of his opponent's men. The act of removing an opponent's man is sometimes called "pounding" the opponent. When one player has been reduced to three men, phase three begins.
- Part Three : Flying
  - When a player is reduced to three pieces, there is no longer a limitation of moving to only adjacent points: The player's men may "fly", "hop", or "jump" from any point to any vacant point.
  - Some rules sources say this is the way the game is played, some treat it as a variation, and some don't mention it at all. A 19th-century games manual calls this the "truly rustic mode of playing the game". Flying was introduced to compensate when the weaker side is one man away from losing the game.



# How to Play 9 Men's Morris

- Strategy
  - At the beginning of the game, it is more important to place pieces in versatile locations rather than to try to form mills immediately and make the mistake of concentrating one's pieces in one area of the board.
  - An ideal position, which typically results in a win, is to be able to shuttle one piece back and forth between two mills, removing a piece every turn.
- Variations
  - Apparently, when making this board, my reference images were incorrect and I made, by mistake a 12 men's morris board. It can still be used for 9 men's morris if the diagonal lines are ignored. 12 men's morris follows exactly the same rules, except that you can form diagonal mills.





# Conclusions

I learned a lot about viking woodworking throughout the course of this project. I have been a fan of celtic knotwork for a long time and I found that I quite enjoy the more casual forms of viking knotwork as well. It was quite pleasant to be able to freehand the knots onto the board rather than having to work with a strict grid pattern as in celtic knotwork.

I got a lot of practice with my woodburner and feel that I am ready to take on more such projects.

I feel bad that I apparently made a 12 men's morris board but only made 9 Swede pieces. I will make three more and mail them to Robyn so she can play both varieties.

I enjoyed learning about Viking board games. I honestly had no idea that they had such a large variety of ways to pass the time. I'll gladly challenge Robyn to a match if I ever see that she's brought her board along to an event.

I thoroughly enjoyed every step of the process of this project. In the future, I think I'll make my game boards a bit larger or the pieces a bit smaller but I really like the fact that this board is so portable.

I only hope that Robyn gets as much enjoyment out of playing with this board as I did from planning and making it.



# Sources

The Gokstad viking ship, Vestfold, Norway

<http://home.online.no/~joeolavl/viking/gokstadskipet.htm>

The Viking Answer Lady

<http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/games.shtml>

Hnefatafl – The Strategic board game of the Vikings by Sten Helmfried (available as a PDF)

[http://hem.bredband.net/b512479/Hnefatafl\\_by\\_Sten\\_Helmfrid.pdf](http://hem.bredband.net/b512479/Hnefatafl_by_Sten_Helmfrid.pdf)

Celtic Design : A Beginner's Manual (used for inspiration on the wolves and Tablut squares)

By Aidan Meehan , ISBN : 0-500-27629-3

<http://www.amazon.com/Celtic-Design-A-Beginners-Manual/dp/0500276293>

9 Men's Morris Wiki

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine\\_Men%27s\\_Morris](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine_Men%27s_Morris)